

Picturing the System: Counter-Institutional Practices in British Art of the 1970s

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines a range of politicized artistic practices in Great Britain during the 1970s, a decade marked by economic decline and social fragmentation. The artists I primarily focus on in the pages that follow—William Furlong, Stephen Willats, Mary Kelly, and Conrad Atkinson—all appeared on *Audio Arts*, a “spoken magazine” distributed on audiocassette that was founded by Furlong in 1973. During the 1970s, Furlong, Willats, Kelly and Atkinson renegotiated their relationship to art institutions, expanded the role of the artist in society, and conceived of art as a form of political praxis, and this dissertation explores the strategies these artists devised to connect to publics outside the elite, bourgeois audience of art.

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*This dissertation is dedicated to Deborah Campbell.*

## *Introduction*

This dissertation examines a range of politicized artistic practices in Great Britain during the 1970s, a period marked by crises and divisions in society and the arts alike. The principal artists I examine in the chapters that follow—William Furlong, Stephen Willats, Mary Kelly and Conrad Atkinson—all sought to relate the art they produced to their immediate surroundings, devising various ways to incorporate current social and political events into their work. Great Britain in the 1970s was characterized by economic recession, social unrest and political fragmentation: the oil crisis of 1973, the “troubles” in Northern Ireland, racial discrimination against minorities, and protests and strikes sparked by the conflict between capital and labor generated a pronounced sense of instability that threatened the unity of the country. The fragmentation that defined the 1970s in Great Britain spilled over into the arts as well. Many artists working in Great Britain received support from the Arts Council of Great Britain, which suffered severe cuts in funding due to the state of the economy; moreover, artists like Atkinson who wanted to produce work that addressed contemporary sociopolitical issues were explicitly censored by the Arts Council, whose administrators argued that politics had nothing to do with art. Arts education in Great Britain experienced a series of shocks as well: art schools were absorbed by larger Polytechnics, and in response students across the country attempted to reform their education by staging protests and occupations. Students and artists alike recognized a lack of opportunity in the arts in Great Britain, and the absence of a thriving commercial gallery system combined with the atrophied condition of arts funding provided by the government motivated them to collectively organize in order to change the relationship between artists, institutions and the state. Atkinson and Kelly were instrumental in the formation of the Artists’

Union in 1972, which advocated for greater artistic autonomy in determining who and what was represented at major art institutions in London. Artists not only pursued reforms in existing arts institutions but also formulated alternative support structures, most notably in the expansive network of alternative spaces and publications generated by feminist artists. Several of the artists I address in this dissertation were both allies and participants in political struggles that informed how they approached the discursive field of art: Kelly's conceptual works that address the experience of motherhood cannot be disassociated from the women's movement, and Atkinson's publicity campaigns that drew attention to the diseases contracted by industrial workers are closely allied with the labor movement in Great Britain. The artists in this dissertation not only represented political issues in their work but also thought of how they produced work in political terms: Willats renounced control over the outcome of his works through collaborations with the residents of tower block housing estates (who largely determined the content of his projects), and Atkinson used the access he had to cultural institutions as an artist to deliver these spaces over to individuals and groups who were subjected to media blackouts by corporate and state power.

The artists mentioned above all appeared on *Audio Arts*, William Furlong's magazine published on audiocassette, which circulated from 1973 to 2006. Furlong established *Audio Arts* in 1973 as a response to the lack in coverage of politicized and experimental art practices in mainstream arts publications and at major art institutions in London. In addition to viewing the magazine as a vehicle for the dissemination of the artist's voice, which would be broadcast to audiences directly rather than through the detour of art criticism, Furlong also regarded *Audio Arts* as a type of exhibition format that could disseminate experimental works (in sound, for example) that at the time had no other venue. From its inception, *Audio Arts* was committed to showcasing politicized artistic practices that wanted to intervene directly into the fabric of

society. While Furlong dedicated a number of issues of *Audio Arts* to events taking place at major arts institutions in London, in this dissertation I argue that *Audio Arts* functioned in the 1970s as an alternative space without a physical address, insofar as it served as a virtual meeting place for artistic practices and discourses that did not achieve great recognition in most arts publications, galleries and museums at the time. In my introductory chapter on *Audio Arts*, I argue that Furlong utilized the new technology of the audiocassette to summon forth what Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser have called a “counterpublic”: a group in conflict with the norms of its cultural environment rooted not only in face-to-face encounters at physical sites but critically produced through the circulation of media. The circulation of *Audio Arts* began small but eventually ran into the thousands, with Furlong creating a type of “networked space” that linked a range of disparate sites and communities through an unprecedented use of the relatively new format of the audiocassette.

My initial research was motivated by an interest in how the new technology of the cassette offered unique technical capacities (the portable and low-cost transmission of speech, for example) that dovetailed with Furlong’s desire to reach audiences outside of mainstream art institutions. The artists covered in this dissertation all sought to engage with audiences and publics beyond the elite, bourgeois sphere of art, and Furlong believed that recorded discussions (speech) on art would engage a broader public than the writing in art magazines, which was characterized by jargon and obfuscation. For one, cassette playback systems were broadly accessible and simple to use; moreover, Furlong insisted that conversational speech was a more effective and democratic tool of communication than writing, and for these reasons Furlong believed that the interviews and discussions he recorded on audiocassette would find a more general public than the specialized, insular debates characterizing writing on contemporary art.

Furthermore, Furlong wanted the cassette to function as the medium of an alternative media structure, with participants recording and sending transmissions in a decentralized network that would operate as a counterforce to more conventional media channels. In my introductory chapter, I explore Furlong's technological utopianism in relationship to the broader media milieu of the 1970s, in which a range of technologies promised more democratic forms of communication. I situate *Audio Arts* within intellectual debates on the relationship between new media and political mobilization through analyzing the work of Walter Ong, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Jean Baudrillard, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. After researching *Audio Arts* and coming to the conclusion that it did not reach a public beyond an already existing infrastructure of art—which, as I contend, is not so much a failure as a misreading of the potential of the cassette medium—I became interested in the ways in which artists devised strategies to engage with alternative publics and audiences. If technological hardware alone could not produce the results that Furlong imagined, then how did artists manage to involve audiences who did not belong to the gallery-going public in their work?

My second chapter focuses on the work of Stephen Willats, who created process-based, participatory projects with residents of tower block housing estates in the 1970s and collaborative collages with various subcultures in the 1980s. Willats appears on *Audio Arts* Vol. 3, No. 1, where he discusses his desire to challenge the isolation and insularity of art: rather than producing objects to be displayed in museums and galleries, Willats wanted artists to extend their work into society. In order to do so, they would have to abandon traditional mediums, exhibition formats, and intellectual precedents to interface with audiences who had little to no prior knowledge of the debates characterizing contemporary art. For Willats, art was confined by institutions and only relevant to an already initiated circle of participants (artists, art school



students, art critics, art historians); in order to circumvent this condition, Willats combined research from cybernetics, behavioral psychology, advertising, and artificial intelligence to devise methods that engaged a range of different audiences from various contexts. As Willats describes in his interview in *Audio Arts*, art generally has a low priority in most people's lives, and it would take a great deal of time to change this; however, he could work within the priorities that already exist in their lives to involve them in his work as an artist. In *Vertical Living*, which took place over a three-week period at the council estate of Skeffington Court, Willats invited the residents there to participate in a project that would focus on the problems they faced as a result of the environment in which they lived. Willats produced "Register Boards" with several residents that contained photographs and texts that described their individual predicaments: no public transportation, feelings of isolation, broken lifts, poor maintenance of facilities. Willats then placed these "Register Boards" throughout the buildings of Skeffington Court and asked the residents to respond to them with possible solutions. Participating residents wrote down their suggestions, which were then posted throughout the buildings as well. At the end of *Vertical Living*, Willats held a number of meetings to discuss the meaning and outcome of the project. With his social projects, Willats wanted to create spaces of critical reflection that generate transformations in how people view themselves, others, and their environment. As I describe in my chapter on Willats, the residents of tower block housing estates like Skeffington Court suffered under terrible living conditions as a result of oversight and mismanagement on the part of government driven by private interests; with *Vertical Living*, individuals who feel powerless in the face of larger forces beyond their control are brought together in a communicative forum to imagine practical alternatives to their present state. While Willats locates his work in contexts outside the museum and gallery, he still utilizes these

institutional spaces as nodes within a larger information circuit: the material he compiles at tower block housing estates is often exhibited at museums and galleries, where he asks visitors to respond as well, creating a complex exchange of data that foregrounds the relativity of context and the social determinations of perception. As an artist, Willats was eager to move outside the space of the gallery and museum, as he envisioned a more socially-engaged artistic practice that would produce concrete political effects in people's everyday lives. He first advocated leaving behind art institutions altogether but quickly realized that he was marginalizing his work. While researching Willats, I reflected on his desire to leave behind art institutions and recognized that this option would only seem feasible to someone who was historically represented in these spaces. Indeed, what would the meaning of leaving behind art institutions be for people—women, for example—who had previously not been recognized by museums and galleries? After completing my chapter on Willats, I turned to the feminist art of the 1970s in Great Britain, focusing on the art of Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly, and Jo Spence and analyzing the scholarship of Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock. The feminist art of the 1970s produced alternative spaces and publications that served as support structures for female artists who were marginalized by the commercial gallery system and public museums; however, it also addressed the contradictory status of women who were beginning to be welcomed into the very art institutions at which they had previously not been welcomed.

In my chapter on British feminist art in the 1970s, I argue that feminism was a dominant force in pressuring art into a direct confrontation with social and political issues. In art historical scholarship, the art of the 1970s has proven somewhat resistant to categorization since it lacks a central organizing principle or movement; however, I contend that feminism played a critical role in the politicization of artistic practices, which is itself a major tendency in British art of the

1970s. The women's movement advocated for equality between men and women in society, which in turn highlighted the asymmetry between male and female representation in art institutions. All of the artists I examine in my dissertation were renegotiating the relationship between artists and art institutions and the very role of art in society itself, yet it was artists like Kelly and Spence who approached these issues from a distinct position of historical marginalization. In my chapter, I explore the ways in which feminist artists debated how female artists should confront the fact of their underrepresentation in mainstream art institutions: should they seek out validation for their work through the acceptance of the very institutions that previously rejected them or should they create alternative contexts for producing, exhibiting, and circulating their art that circumvented traditional channels? Moreover, I examine how feminist artists grappled with the issue of gendered subjectivity itself—while some female artists viewed their work through the lens of gender essentialism (e.g., elevating traditionally feminine crafts, emphasizing biological differences between men and women), others critically deconstructed the feminine subject position or wanted their work to be evaluated in universal terms in the absence of any consideration of their gender. As I show in my chapter, feminist art in the 1970s was by no means a unified field of activity but marked by internal conflicts and debates. Kelly and Hiller appear on *Audio Arts* Vol. 3, No. 3, where they discuss their artistic practices and how they address their status as female artists. While Hiller regards her subjectivity as a kind of lived experience that exists outside symbolic structures, Kelly offers a different account of the female “self,” arguing that there is no subjectivity beyond symbolic structures. In her work that examines inequality in the workplace and the difficulties of motherhood, Kelly explores the ways in which the feminine subject position is produced within symbolic structures, which opens this process to critical analysis and deconstruction. In my chapter, I examine theoretical debates in

feminism, with a particular emphasis on psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity.

Psychoanalysis—long considered to be antithetical to the cause of women’s liberation because of the ways in which it placed women in a position of inferiority (e.g., lacking the phallus)—was an important theoretical resource for feminist theorists and artists, who utilized it to understand and challenge the oppression of women. In my chapter on feminist art, I was interested in how the political struggles of the women’s movement were brought to bear on artistic practice. Feminist artists brought issues women were facing in society into the space of art, which led me to the work of Conrad Atkinson, who utilized the space of the museum to publicize current events that represented the inequities of the capitalist system.

Atkinson began his career as a painter, and his work from the 1960s represented contemporary social events in a style influenced by European modernists from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1972, he was invited to the ICA to exhibit his paintings, but he abandoned the medium and exhibited *Strike at Brannans*, which gave a platform to the female workers of a thermometer factory in his hometown of Cleator Moor as they engaged in a unionization campaign that culminated in a strike. In *Strike at Brannans*, Atkinson assembled and exhibited case histories, letters, wage slips, and photographs from the factory workers, giving viewers to the museum a comprehensive and complex portrait of an event that would have otherwise received little attention in major newspapers and on television. He also brought two strikers to London to meet with a local member of Parliament and staged a number of discussions at the ICA related to the immediate situation at Brannans that also addressed the exploitation of labor in other contexts (Brannans factory workers met with members of the London night-cleaners campaign at one of the events). With *Strike at Brannans*, Atkinson did not simply bring politics into the museum but used the museum as a space that could change the course of politics—in his

exhibitions, Atkinson wanted to use art institutions as spaces of publicity that could alter domestic policy in Great Britain. He urged the government to provide greater support to industrial workers that contracted diseases, criticized the Royal Family for not revoking a distillery company's "royal warrant" after it was discovered that a product it manufactured had caused a range of birth defects, and caused a public scandal over the Arts Council's censorship of his work, which led to a wide-ranging debate on how the government handled arts funding. Conservative critics of Atkinson argued that what he was doing was not art since his documentary approach was too akin to reportage; however, artist Timothy Rollins inverted this criticism by arguing that Atkinson, in abandoning the traditional role of the artist, greatly expanded the scope of art in society. In Atkinson's hands, art becomes a form of exposure and communication instead of a specialized and insular domain of aesthetic or stylistic preoccupations; the museum, rather than a neutral sanctuary isolated from political struggles occurring in society, is reclaimed by Atkinson as a publicity platform through which counter-information can be disseminated and oppositional counter-publics can be formed. In my final chapter on Atkinson, I explore the ways in which he recovers the radical social mission of avant-garde art: to provide frameworks of critical understanding that potentially recalibrate our perceptions of self and other, person and society.

Over the course of writing my dissertation, I found that an initially technological question—the capacity of new media to introduce novel forms of communication and political mobilization—opened out onto a broader social question that involved a diverse set of strategies. While *Audio Arts* was my path into the field of politicized artistic practices in London during the 1970s, through writing each chapter I recognized that the problematic I was interested in could not be reduced to technological hardware alone: how did artists challenge the traditional role of

the artist as a producer of objects for aesthetic contemplation and financial speculation while discovering different modes of engaging with a broader public than the elite, bourgeois audience that generally attended museums and galleries? In my chapter on Atkinson, I describe how specific conditions in London produced the grounds for the kinds of politicized art practices that I cover in my dissertation. Due to the absence of a thriving commercial gallery system, artists in London were not as tempted by the lure of success on the art market; because of the general economic decline in the 1970s and the drawbacks in arts funding that ensued, artists were pressured into developing alternative means of support or confronting the inadequacy of governmental support of the arts by reforming the Arts Council; the Left was a more organized and dominant force in British politics than in the United States—largely due to the public presence and collective actions of labor unions—which granted artists like Kelly and Atkinson opportunities to collaborate with them on several occasions (Kelly worked closely with the night-cleaners unionization campaign when she made the film *Nightcleaners* with the Berwick Street Collective; Atkinson produced five banners for the Northern Region of the General and Municipal Workers' Union). My initial engagement with *Audio Arts*—which served as the beginnings of this project—hinged on the technological medium of the cassette and how it promised new forms of media production, communication, and dissemination; however, as I argue in my chapter on *Audio Arts*, specific consequences (e.g. the democratization of information) do not immediately issue forth from the medium itself, and I push back against the idea that a medium is intrinsically more progressive or open than any other. Instead, I argue that a medium must be understood in relation to the individual or group using it, the specific institutions in which it operates, and the historical horizon that determines how it can function. The artists I examine in this dissertation deployed a range of strategies to politicize their work

and relate it to a broader public, which caused me to shift away from an emphasis on privileging one medium over others towards the specific ensemble of tactics artists used within given frameworks. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock write, “It is not a matter of choosing between figuration or abstraction, conceptual or scripto-visual forms, only one of which can be authorized as appropriate. It is a matter of calculating what effect any particular procedure or medium will produce in relation to a given audience, a particular context and the actual historical moment.”<sup>i</sup>

While a great deal of scholarship has been produced on the arts in the United States and Europe generally during the 1960s, the arts in London during the 1970s have received little attention. One of the reasons for this neglect is the fact that Great Britain spent most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reacting to developments taking place elsewhere; as art historian Charles Harrison writes, “the history of modern art in England is to a large extent a history of delayed and mediated responses.” In the postwar period, New York is generally positioned as the capital of art, generating a succession of movements—Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art—that altered the course of artistic practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While New York’s status as a dominant center is undeniable during this period, it often overshadows the extent to which novel artistic practices were emerging in contexts like London that were not simply responding to these developments. Indeed, the arts of 1970s London were marked by a throwing off of influences from abroad in order to address the immediate social and political conditions artists encountered in their everyday lives. As I argue in this dissertation, artists in London during the 1970s developed new forms of artistic practice that forged alliances with audiences that did not belong to the gallery-going public and dramatically changed the ways in which art could function in society. While critics and historians tend to generally avoid the

1970s due to its lack of internal consistency compared to the 1960s (which challenged the hegemony of High Modernism with a proliferation of new mediums and strategies) and the 1980s (which signaled the return of more traditional modes of artistic expression), in this dissertation I hope to demonstrate that the politicization of artistic practices during this decade is an important development that offers a way into a decade that is often considered to be too pluralistic or heterogeneous to analyze. As Conrad Atkinson wrote in 1979, “Contrary to the myth being spread by the media to the effect that the visual arts flourished magnificently in the 60s, and the 70s have produced little, the 70s and particularly the last four years have seen a strong and vital progressive movement which has begun to approach reality through a number of areas directly related to social and political questions.”<sup>iii</sup> While my account here is by no means exhaustive, in this dissertation I aim to show that during the 1970s in London, artists like Willats, Atkinson, Kelly and Furlong renegotiated their relationship to art institutions, expanded the role of the artist in society, and conceived of art as a form of political praxis, and their examination of the ideological functions of art and art institutions can be felt as an influence in a range of socially-engaged artistic practices in the decades that followed.



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<sup>i</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, “Fifteen Years of Feminist Action: From Practical Strategies to Strategic Practices,” in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, ed. and intro. by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1987), 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Quote from a statement given at the Theatre Writers’ Union conference on censorship, London, January 28, 1979, reprinted in John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 2.

## I. *Audio Arts*

In 1973, British artist and educator William Furlong established *Audio Arts*, a “spoken magazine” published on audiocassette, in London (*Fig. 1*). While Furlong had planned initially to create a printed publication, he saw unique possibilities in the format of the audiocassette, which at the time was a relatively new technology. The audiocassette was cheap, lightweight, portable, and—compared to the process of transcribing, editing, and formatting a magazine—fast, making it a convenient medium to distribute artists’ works and interviews on a small budget.<sup>i</sup> While magazines required commercial advertising to remain afloat and an editorial staff to refine the content that would eventually make its way to publication, *Audio Arts* was run primarily by Furlong himself, who managed to issue editions of his cassette magazine for over three decades, starting it with a small grant of 300 pounds from the Arts Council of Great Britain. Furlong founded *Audio Arts* when he recognized that most arts publications in London were fairly conservative, inasmuch as they did not cover artistic practices in mediums other than painting and sculpture. Moreover, artists who sought to engage with the immediate social and political context in London in the 1970s through strategies of communication outside the modernist tradition and, at times, the gallery or museum altogether faced difficulties in securing adequate representation for their work.

From its inception, Furlong framed *Audio Arts* as a conduit for the circulation of artistic practices and the discourses surrounding them. As Furlong stated in an issue of *Studio International* devoted to art magazines, “the practical problems involved in covering new manifestations as they take place are enormous and outside the resources of most art journals. This situation could be improved if the art journal was seen more as an integral part of the

externalization of artists' concerns rather than an aloof institution there to pass judgment.”<sup>ii</sup>

Instead of a space of critical evaluation, Furlong regarded *Audio Arts* as a medium through which artists could exhibit their work and articulate their concerns in interviews. In the wake of conceptual art, when many artists were producing non-traditional works that engaged with sound, language, and the contemporary media environment, the audiocassette served as a critical format for their dissemination. As Furlong states in an interview from 1981, “One of the most important, and I think central, areas of *Audio Arts* has been the collaboration with artists, and to make *Audio Arts* as a context available for their work. A context through which works can actually be realized and developed and expanded and disseminated.”<sup>iii</sup> More of a facilitator than an editor, Furlong largely eschewed control of the programming and content of *Audio Arts* in favor of permitting artists to determine the nature of their contributions to his cassette magazine, which aligns his project with numerous artist-run alternative spaces and publications in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1970s, London was characterized by economic recession, social unrest and political fragmentation, which created significant drawbacks for arts funding that affected museums, galleries and art schools. Due to the absence of a thriving commercial gallery system in London, most arts funding was distributed through the Arts Council of Great Britain. During the late 1960s and 1970s, numerous panels and organizations challenged the practices of the Arts Council, specifically that it did not offer funding to new forms of visual art that were not painting and sculpture, such as performance, video, work in sound, etc. While the Arts Council responded to these criticisms by forming organizations such as the New Activities Committee and the Experimental Projects Committee in order to allocate funding to these types of artistic practices, the limited amount of money delivered from the state to the visual arts in the early 1970s (95,000

pounds out of a budget of 8 million) forced artists to improvise other means of support.<sup>iv</sup> A sense of increasing disillusionment and frustration with the kinds of art promoted by public museums and commercial galleries led to the establishment of alternative spaces and the emergence of artistic practices whose aims were diverse but driven generally by concerns about the social and political impact of art.<sup>v</sup> *Audio Arts* emerged in this context as an alternative space without a brick-and-mortar location, since it offered a circulating venue in which marginalized artistic practices could be supported, promoted and debated. While many alternative spaces and artist magazines struggled to remain operating due to the dire economic situation in London during the 1970s, *Audio Arts* managed to consistently publish cassettes covering the most advanced artistic practices because it required so little financial outlay and logistical coordination. As Furlong remarks, “The organization of *Audio Arts* is very straightforward. It can be with cassettes, unlike perhaps books production or record production where you have to have enormous runs of products or the units made in order to make the whole thing viable. This also reflects in the fact that I’ve been able to produce between six and eight new issues a year, and to do that in terms of records or books would cost you a fortune.”<sup>vi</sup>

In his writings, Furlong argues that the cassette is a medium that can circumvent the various limitations that constrain print media. The common need for advertising to finance a publication, the delays and hands involved in editorializing content, and the requirement that a significant number of magazines, journals or books be printed for such an endeavor to be economically feasible are all factors that have to be taken into consideration. In *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, art historian Gwen Allen notes that magazines such as *Aspen*, *0 to 9*, *Avalanche*, and *Art-Rite* all share in common relatively brief publishing runs, averaging about five years each. These magazines, Allen remarks, are characterized by a distinct

engagement with the present moment, covering the most recent manifestations of their respective contexts as well as creating a space in which unknown artists could gain broader exposure. For Allen, artists' magazines are also marked by transience and impermanence: the difficulties editors of alternative publications had to navigate in order to keep them circulating often resulted in decidedly short lifespans, with the causes of termination ranging from bureaucratic regulations of the postal system to financial struggles.<sup>vii</sup> *Audio Arts* began publishing in 1973 and stopped issuing cassettes in 2006. Furlong's project can be distinguished from other artists' magazines not only in terms of its physical format—recorded sound instead of printed matter—but also because of the logistical complications he avoided in choosing it. Since the costs of reproducing cassettes do not change significantly over large and small runs, duplicates can be made as requests for issues arrive. Rather than estimating demand at the outset and hoping subscribers would meet the supply generated, Furlong could respond to requests in real-time, operating on the principle of feedback instead of stockpiling. Moreover, once the recording is made duplicates can be produced immediately: therefore, the temporal gap between capturing an event or conversation and reproducing it in a form that can be circulated is drastically reduced when compared with print media. Jack Burnham, who applied systems theory to the analysis of contemporary art in a series of groundbreaking essays published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was an early advocate of *Audio Arts*; surely one of its attractions for him was its use of a relatively unsophisticated technology to produce an informational circuit that could record and disseminate discussions on contemporary art in “real-time.”<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, in comparison to book and record production, creating a cassette “magazine” did not require a large financial outlay and could be carried out by Furlong himself, who served as *Audio Art*'s peripatetic interlocutor for over 30 years. While *Audio Arts* was produced mainly by Furlong, however, it stands as a

collective enunciation: the archive is a collaborative enterprise rooted in dialogue and intellectual exchange that does not cohere around a single authorial voice.

In recording interviews and disseminating them in an audio format, Furlong offered a means for artists to verbally determine the meaning of their artistic practices instead of leaving that task to art critics. During the 1960s and 1970s, artists began to publish magazines and run alternative spaces, which diminished the role of critics as gatekeepers to artistic recognition and success. In an interview from 2006, Furlong remarks that the conversations with artists that he recorded functioned as “a kind of history from a primary source” that would supplement “histories...from a secondary position” in academic Art History.<sup>ix</sup> *Audio Arts*, then, became a conduit through which artists could articulate their priorities and concerns, which could at times contradict the accounts of art critics and art historians. In interviews, Furlong is not dismissive of art criticism or the discipline of Art History—indeed, many issues of *Audio Arts* feature contributions from critics, curators, historians, and other members of the art world—but he nevertheless viewed his interviews with artists as a means for them to engage in dialogue with evaluations of their work from other quarters. Not unlike artist-run alternative spaces and artist magazines, which offered venues in which artists could experiment without being told what to produce by dealers and critics, *Audio Arts* signaled the empowerment of artists by giving them an open platform to account for and explain their work.

Furthermore, the cassette offered listeners access to the voice of the artist in a raw, unfiltered state that was absent from the editorialized or transcribed interviews appearing in the pages of printed magazines. Furlong describes how *Audio Arts* was driven by the desire to capture the dimensions of conversation that are lost because it is ephemeral or transcribed: “the intonation, the timing, the wit, the irony and so on that you can hear in someone’s voice and that

you can't transcribe very easily were possible in recording.”<sup>x</sup> Furlong views conversation as the primary medium in which ideas are expressed, with print operating as an epiphenomenon that reduces the complexity and texture of embodied speech. Indeed, conversation contains a variety of nuances that print simply cannot reproduce: the pace of speaking, the recursive nature of unscripted dialogue, the specificities of accent, as well as all the interruptions and non-signifying hesitations (“um...”) that characterize speech. As Germano Celant writes in “The Record as Artwork,” “As the mechanical extension of the written or spoken word, [recorded speech] can release written research from the immobility and passivity of the printed page and restore to communication those qualities of spoken language which printing removes.”<sup>xi</sup> The conversations contained on *Audio Arts* releases allow the listener to engage with artists’ thoughts as they are in the process of being expressed—however imperfectly at times—which evades the ways in which transcribed interviews are “distanced from the original impetus for the material” according to Furlong.<sup>xii</sup>

Allen has described the ways in which the visual character of commercial art magazines fostered a logic of promotion and commodification: “the integration of criticism within the spectacular economy of the commercial art magazine greatly accelerated the process of evaluating art. Whereas early criticism depended on the duration of the dialog form as well as the uncertainty of a conclusion that is central to the unfolding of conversation, the newly visual character of the art magazine replaced the unhurried pace of thought and conversation with the immediacy of an overnight sensation.”<sup>xiii</sup> While Furlong noted his ability to record and circulate information at a quicker pace than printed publications, the medium of sound—which requires time to unfold—and the direct impression of the artist’s voice onto the audiotape meant that listeners of *Audio Arts* had to slow down in order to mirror the tempo of the event recorded and

follow the flow of conversation. In her study, Allen describes how the artist magazine *Avalanche* eliminated art criticism and exhibition reviews in its pages, choosing instead to display documentation of artistic works and interviews with artists. *Avalanche*, then, became what she describes as a “direct channel for the artist’s voice.”<sup>xiv</sup> Furthermore, *Avalanche* strove to capture the actual pace and character of spoken conversation, which made it different from other art magazines that featured interviews with artists (see, for example, interviews with Abstract Expressionists from the 1940s, which read like a series of prepared questions and responses).<sup>xv</sup> According to Allen, *Avalanche* interviews “circle and ramble, as real conversations do” and they “convey something of the affective nuance and informal quality of the original exchanges they record, allowing us to imagine that we are eavesdropping on history... The interviews capture the rhythms and cadences of natural speech, brimming with pauses, non sequiturs, phatic expressions—those qualities that characterize actual conversations.”<sup>xvi</sup> Unlike the commercial magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, which were generally driven by rapid cycles of promotion and spectacular display, Allen argues that *Avalanche* communicated the improvisational character of conversations among artists. In this regard, *Avalanche* and *Audio Arts* shared similar objectives. While *Avalanche* transcribed “natural speech” onto the printed page, however, *Audio Arts* utilized sound recording to reproduce the conversations as they occurred, which brought the listener into a direct relationship with the artist’s voice. Through privileging spoken conversation over the visual spectacle characterizing art magazines, Furlong strove to subvert the commercial function of publicity in the art world by providing substantive coverage of the debates and discussions surrounding advanced art.

For Furlong, the cassette contains several practical advantages as a communication device. Art critic Caroline Tisdall points out that due to the fact that *Audio Arts* did not require



significant financial backing it could produce issues that engaged more thoroughly with the heterogeneity and experimentation characterizing the most recent art in London, Europe and America during the 1970s. Described by *Audio Arts* associate and art critic Michael Archer as an “ultra-convenient, demotic format,” the cassette became a means by which Furlong could cheaply reproduce and circulate recent debates surrounding the relationship between artists, artworks, and audiences, while also serving as a legitimate vehicle for the distribution of artistic works that utilized sound as a medium. While modern and contemporary art museums have begun to accommodate artistic works in sound over the past 15 years, when *Audio Arts* began issuing cassettes in the early 1970s artists who used sound as a medium did not have many places to exhibit their work.<sup>xvii</sup> As Furlong comments in an interview from 2006, “Audio Arts was the only funnel, the only conduit for a lot of art practice that didn’t have any other outlet. And I think that’s why a lot of artists were interested in it: artists that worked with speech; artists that worked with the voice; artists that worked experimentally with music.”<sup>xviii</sup> Furlong, however, did not strive to create a separate category of “sound art” through *Audio Arts* and still hesitates to use the term when describing his activities: “I work in sound occasionally and that’s as far as I’ll go.”<sup>xix</sup> Instead of attempting to revive a retrograde notion of medium-specificity, through *Audio Arts* Furlong shows the ways in which sound, far from being a distinct and contained area of artistic activity, is an integral component of a heterogeneous range of artistic practices that can in no way be reduced to a discrete medium or style.<sup>xx</sup> From a practical standpoint, then, the cassette contained certain advantages: it could reproduce artistic works in the medium of sound and discussions did not need to be transcribed or printed but could be recorded and circulated almost immediately.

As both a sound archive of artist interviews and a vehicle for the dissemination of artistic works, *Audio Arts* utilized new means of electronic production and distribution to address what Michael Warner has called a “counterpublic”: a community in conflict with the norms of its cultural environment that is formed not exclusively through face-to-face encounters at physical sites but rather through the exchange of circulating media.<sup>xxi</sup> Warner distinguishes an audience, which requires co-presence, from a public, which is created by the circulation of information among strangers who, through this exchange, become a social unit. As a circulating format, *Audio Arts* drew attention to artistic practices that were neglected by mainstream arts institutions and art magazines—it therefore functioned as an alternative platform and meeting point for various artistic discourses. The range and diversity of material covered in *Audio Arts* demonstrates that it was a polyphonic space characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives, with Furlong placing a considerable emphasis on artists who related their work to the immediate sociopolitical context in which they operated. As an editor, Furlong was consistently preoccupied with art’s social function, and one of his aims in producing *Audio Arts* was to utilize a new technology as yet another avenue through which artists could connect their work to society. During the 1970s and beyond, *Audio Arts* served as a critical mode of publicity for politicized and experimental artistic practices, giving them broader recognition and legitimacy. The public summoned forth through the circulation of *Audio Arts* was a “counterpublic” insofar as it strove to subvert then dominant modes of producing and understanding art: instead of functioning as a promotional vehicle for already established artists, during the 1970s *Audio Arts* consistently broadcasted works and discussions that challenged art’s commodity status and its isolation in art institutions.

Warner's idea of a "counterpublic" is indebted to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience*, a study of media and politics in post-industrial society whose point of departure was Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.<sup>xxii</sup> For Habermas, the public sphere emerges in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and refers to the process by which individuals come together to rationally debate social and political issues. The Enlightenment undermined monarchical rule, feudal privileges, and religious authority, and as a result forms of participatory democracy began to take root in Europe throughout this period. As Thomas McCarthy describes in the introduction to the English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, "in its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people."<sup>xxiii</sup> While the public sphere was actualized in discussions occurring in physical locations such as coffee houses and salons, it was also crucially produced by circulating newspapers and newsletters, which publicized political issues and served as critical forums of debate and information for citizens. For Habermas, the public sphere is a mechanism by which groups of engaged participants collaborate to limit authoritarian control by the state or the illegitimate abuse of power through the deployment of rational debate, and its historical impact is evident in the creation of constitutional states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century throughout Europe.

However, in Habermas's historical schema the public sphere begins to erode in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the pressure of commercial interests, most notably through the rise of the mass media. Instead of a sphere of enlightened discussion and rational-critical debate, the public

sphere devolved into what Habermas defines as “pseudopublicity,” which places a greater emphasis on stimulating consumption than informing citizens of political issues. Control of the public sphere was wrested from concerned individuals and groups by modern capitalistic enterprises, which used media to promote their own economic power: “therewith emerged a new sort of influence, i.e. media power, which, used for purposes of manipulation, once and for all took care of the innocence of the principle of publicity. The public sphere, simultaneously restructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible.”<sup>xxiv</sup> The newspaper, which had served to keep engaged readers informed of current events, is superseded by the various media of the culture industry (radio, film, television, etc.), which distract the public from the actual processes governing society and deprive individuals and groups from understanding them and consequently influencing their development. The mass media, allied with advertising and public relations, offers cheap and effective diversions that transform active citizens into passive consumers, who are viewed by those in power as statistical aggregates to be controlled in order to ensure the accumulation of corporate profits and the consolidation of state power. Due to the impact of the mass media, the public sphere becomes “refeudalized” as civil society is increasingly characterized by political and economic inequalities.

For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere was an inclusive space of “common concern” that disregarded—at least *in principle*—the status of its interlocutors. While its emergence is inextricably linked to capitalist expansion, insofar as capitalism created a reticulated geographic network in which commodities and news were exchanged, Habermas argues that it was relatively

free of the pressures of the market, which distinguishes it from the “pseudopublicity” characterizing the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The public sphere is theorized by Habermas as an ideal and universal space of rational debate: potentially *anyone* could be heard and consequently shape the realm of “public opinion.” However, critics such as Nancy Fraser have pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere was by no means universal, as it was predicated on the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups: “this network of clubs and associations...was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a “universal class” and preparing to assert their fitness to govern.”<sup>xxv</sup> While she regards the public sphere as a useful category to explore the relationship between the circulation of information by particular individuals and groups and the critique of political power, Fraser insists that Habermas’s analysis of a bourgeois public sphere must be supplemented with an examination of the social formations produced by individuals and groups who were excluded from it. While Habermas describes a monolithic bourgeois public sphere that emerges in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and begins to decline due to the rise of the culture industry and mass consumerism, Fraser contends that the public sphere Habermas theorizes is inadequate insofar as it neglects the various “counter-publics” that are not bourgeois but still serve a decisive role in the articulation of political priorities. As Fraser defines them, “counterpublics” are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

The artists and critics featured on *Audio Arts* releases constituted this type of “parallel discursive arena”: Conrad Atkinson, Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison, the Artist Placement Group, Stephen Willats, Lorainne Leeson, Peter Dunn, Caroline Tisdall and Richard Cork

(among many others) examined the relationship between artistic practices and politics through challenging the institutional enclosure of art in museums and galleries and attempting to connect the discursive field of aesthetics to contemporary sociopolitical events. In his *Work, Wages, and Prices* (1974) and *Silver Liberties* (1978), Conrad Atkinson exposed exploitative labor practices and criticized Great Britain's colonial war against Northern Ireland; John Latham & Barbara Stevini, under the auspices of the Artist Placement Group, sought out placements for artists in various governmental and corporate contexts as a means to create new ways for artists to operate in society; Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt produced *Women and Work* (1973-75), a sociological study of the female labor force at a metal box factory that recorded the discrepancies in occupations and wages between male and female employees while also raising questions around the issue of domestic labor; Stephen Willats located his artistic practice beyond the confines of the museum and gallery to produce collaborative projects with tower block residents that examined the living conditions there, creating a communicative space in which residents could collectively propose alternatives and solutions to the problems they faced in their everyday lives; Lorainne Leeson and Peter Dunn were instrumental in the Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign (1977-78), preventing the hospital's closure by drawing attention to its precarious status and the financial interests of property developers through producing posters and engaging in community organizing; critics Caroline Tisdall, who wrote for *The Guardian*, and Richard Cork, editor of *Studio International* and curator of a number of important "social-purpose" art exhibitions throughout London, frequently promoted artistic practices that eschewed traditional mediums and modes of exhibition in the service of generating political effects.

In the 1970s, *Audio Arts* responded to its immediate surroundings, both coordinating and recording events that were taking place at alternative spaces such as the Battersea Arts Centre as

well as major art institutions, including the Whitechapel Gallery and the Royal Academy of Art. Indeed, *Audio Arts* is more than simply a collection of recordings since Furlong exhibited various projects in galleries and presented on the potential of circulating formats at conferences throughout Europe. Furlong noticed that arts publications and art institutions were not adequately covering politicized artistic practices and works that utilized new mediums such as sound, performance and video, and by circulating *Audio Arts* Furlong hoped to redress this problem. In 1976, Furlong published *Audio Arts* Vol. 3, No. 1, a cassette devoted to the recent work of Stephen Willats, whose participatory projects were primarily located outside of the gallery (his work will be addressed in the following chapter). Both sides of the cassette contain interviews with Willats, who describes how his desire to move beyond traditional spaces for the production and exhibition of art was motivated by the realization that art had become gradually removed from any social context. According to Willats, who spent time working at several galleries as a student, art had become “rarefied” and “internalized” and “dependent on institutions of art as well as [their] audiences,” who were often members of the same communities as artists themselves. Not unlike Furlong, Willats engaged with the potential of circulation—in this case, *his* circulation among spaces and contexts not generally addressed or engaged with by art—to reach audiences outside of art institutions, just as Furlong wished to do by distributing his cassette magazine.

Many *Audio Arts* releases took a fairly conventional format—the recorded interview, lecture, or conference. On Vol. 2, No. 1, Furlong devoted each side to lectures delivered by Buckminster Fuller and Joseph Beuys at Art Net in 1974; side one of Vol. 3, No. 3 is a lecture by Conrad Atkinson in which he describes how artists must develop strategies to address their role in society and contest the dominant order, while side two contains a discussion on feminist art

between Mary Kelly and Susan Hiller, whose disagreements on how female artists should understand and combat their marginalization present a compelling snapshot of the internal disputes in feminist art practice of the 1970s; an *Audio Arts* supplement from 1978 is a multi-cassette, fifteen-hour recording of the entirety of “The State of British Art,” a conference at the ICA with topics ranging from the problems facing arts education to artists’ engagement with popular culture and whose participants included Peter Fuller, David Hockney, John Tagg, Rasheed Araeen, Lisa Tickner, Terry Atkinson and Victor Burgin among many others. However, in addition to recorded lectures and interviews *Audio Arts* utilized the cassette to circulate works in sound—poetry, experimental music, conceptual art—that explored the specific properties and potential of the cassette. Furlong has described how he wanted *Audio Arts* to provide space to artistic practices that did not have other forums or formats for exhibition and distribution, and several releases in its first decade accomplished that goal.

*Audio Arts* Vol. 3, No. 2, “Recent English Experimental Music,” was produced in collaboration with *Studio International* and included contributions by Michael Nyman, Howard Skempton, Christopher Hobbs, and Gavin Bryars; on an *Audio Arts* supplement from 1978 Richard Hamilton and Dieter Roth read poetry and perform their play *Die Grosse Bockwurst* at the Whitechapel Gallery; another supplement from 1979 is a recording of a Dan Graham performing *Performer/Audience/Mirror* at Riverside Studios in London on the same evening as a concert by The Static, a band that included Glenn Branca, Barbara Ess and Christine Hahn. Both Lawrence Weiner and David Troostwyk made works specifically for *Audio Arts*: on “Concerning Twenty Works” Weiner uses audio montage to bring together twenty of his works on display at an exhibition at the Anthony d’Offay gallery in 1980, while Troostwyk interspersed his speech between commercial music and news reports of political unrest in Ireland, imagining that his



pieces were slots for the BBC to insert between programs that were different from the usual classical music interludes. In addition to exploring the specific properties of recorded sound, *Audio Arts* was also instrumental in bringing sound into the gallery through various exhibitions in London, NYC and Europe more generally.

Furlong participated in “British Soundworks” (1980) at Franklin Furnace, “Audio Scene 79” (1979) at the Modern Art Galerie in Vienna (for which there is an accompanying *Audio Arts* cassette), and “Live to Air: Artists’ Sound Works” (1982) (*Fig. 2*) at the Hayward Gallery, while also creating the “tape-slide sequence,” a low-budget and portable format for the presentation of artistic works and ideas that lasted approximately ten minutes. As Furlong conceived it, the tape-slide sequence—which was simply a collection of slides with an accompanying recording, a kind of ad-hoc “film” consisting of visual materials and sound—was not intended as documentation of a previously realized event but needed to have a live dimension, just as a performance would. As Furlong writes, “the project initiated by Audio Arts is intended to extend the ways in which art can function in a variety of situations without the constraints associated with exhibition organization and the staging of live events. Since slide projection and tape re-play forms the basis of the presentation, viewing situations are flexible in both scale and in location.” Furlong also collaborated with the Artist Placement Group on *Reminiscence Aids* (1979), a project that involved working with elderly populations housed in London hospitals and hospice care and engaging them in memory retention and mental stimulation exercises to mitigate mental deterioration. Along with Ian Breakwell, David Toop, Hugh Davies and Mick Kemp, who was the principal architect of the Department of Health and Social Security in the UK during this period, Furlong used audio recordings and other visual materials to restore a sense of identity and social connection to people who suffered from isolation due to their psychological conditions as

well as the alienating environments in which they lived. While the cassette was designated as the primary medium of choice for *Audio Arts*, Furlong's activities as an editor and artist extended beyond simply recording events taking place at alternative spaces and galleries throughout London.

*Audio Arts* was a virtual platform that brought together different voices and perspectives to form a "counterpublic" that stood in opposition to dominant modes of speaking about and understanding art. Theorizing the individuals and groups that *Audio Arts* summoned forth as a "counterpublic" is useful insofar as Furlong deployed and recalibrated the very means of industrial-commercial publicity that Habermas believed had caused the decline of the public sphere. For Habermas, the corporate and governmental interests driving the mass media barred the possibility that it could be used towards politically progressive ends. Since his historical account describes the ways in which media had been used to stimulate consumption and manufacture consent over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Habermas could not envision the function of industrially advanced communications media changing in the present. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, however, Negt and Kluge argue that "counterpublics" exploit the very media that Habermas disdains as "pseudopublicity." In their study, Negt and Kluge engage with various new media in the early 1970s (video, cassette, cable, satellite broadcasting, data banks, computers, etc.) as terrains of political contestation rather than dismissing them as ever more distractions from rational-critical debate, and in so doing they refuse to understand post-bourgeois social formations solely in terms of fragmentation, decline, and alienation.<sup>xxvii</sup> Negt and Kluge argue that mass media is not *exclusively* manipulation since its function is labile and open to revision: as they describe, the most technologically advanced media can be used to compete with and subvert dominant media. Habermas draws up a diagram of media

communication in which powerful corporate conglomerates and state bureaucracies use it as an instrument to exercise control on a passive populace, and in his system there is little consideration of how the operation of media could lead to different social and political effects if its organizational structure and mode of dissemination were altered. While Negt and Kluge do not ignore the detrimental impact mass media have had on political discourse and social agency, they still regard the field of media publicity as a domain that can be reappropriated and transformed by individual and collective action. As Miriam Hansen writes, “The issue for Negt and Kluge is in each case whether and to what extent experience is dis/organized from ‘above’—by the exclusionary standards or in the interest of property—or from ‘below,’ by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living...Negt and Kluge see the media of industrial-commercial publicity, in their most negative implications, as an inescapable horizon, and as the most advanced site of struggle over the organization of everyday experience which contextualizes all other sites.”<sup>xxviii</sup> By utilizing the cassette—a medium produced by the consumer electronics industry predominantly for the playback of pre-recorded music—and altering its intended use, Furlong intervened into the field of industrial-commercial publicity to produce what Negt and Kluge describe as “counterproductions,” which undermine dominant media channels through inhabiting the terrain of new media and demonstrating alternative modes of organization and communication.

Furlong championed the artists and critics above, offering his “spoken magazine” as a circulating medium in which they could both discuss their work in interviews and conversations or exhibit their projects in sound and performance in a new format. In addressing a mediated public instead of an embodied audience, *Audio Arts* grew out of an awareness of the ways in which circulating media could determine the reception of art that appeared in museums and

galleries and could even serve as exhibition contexts in their own right. During the 1960s and 1970s, many artists sought out alternative modes of distribution for their work through printed publications. Dan Graham's "Homes for America," Robert Smithson's "Incidents for Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," and Lee Lozano's tactic of purchasing advertising space in arts magazines demonstrate how artists were negotiating the relationship between physical site and circulating media, treating the printed page at times as a primary site of exhibition.<sup>xxix</sup> As Alexander Alberro writes on "Homes for America," Graham "recognized that since most people rarely see original works of art but know of them primarily through illustrations in art magazines, the work could effectively be embedded in the magazine from the very beginning."<sup>xxx</sup> Similarly, Furlong deployed *Audio Arts* as an exhibition space in which artists could grapple with the specific parameters of his cassette magazine. For performance artists and artists using sound and speech, the format of the cassette offered new possibilities for the presentation of their work: performances that would have been described in reviews and documented through photographs were granted a living presence (at least aurally), and works in sound could circulate beyond the confines of galleries and museums. For Furlong, recording discussions, performances, and interviews granted an immediacy to these events that would have been lost in other formats, and he insists that the direct impress of sound onto audiotape brings the listener closer to the material contained on *Audio Arts*: "To react in a first hand way, rather than reading a review of it, or a description or a photographic documentation of it. This has remained the primary policy of *Audio Arts*, to record and present material frontally."<sup>xxxi</sup>

Conceptual artists often inverted the conventional sequence between 'original' event—exhibition in a gallery or museum—and 'secondary' documentation of it—photos, reviews, etc.—through treating the dematerialized forms of texts, photos and documents as the principal

vehicles for their work. As a curator and dealer of conceptual art, Seth Siegelaub believed that circulating media could make art more accessible to the public: no longer limited to the physical container of the museum or gallery, conceptual art could be disseminated in printed publications and reach audiences outside art institutions. However, Siegelaub's deployment of direct-mail advertising for the artists he represented as well as the circulation of what he described as "advance information" summoned forth a new class of collectors who wanted to invest in experimental art. Instead of generating a "counterpublic" that challenged the commodity status of art and sought to produce artworks that generated political effects, Siegelaub's circulation of printed media created a new market for art, one in which collectors purchased documents rather than paintings or sculptures. Siegelaub used circulation as a means to ensure art's assimilation into a restructured market based on the exchange of the "dematerialized" products of conceptual art, and his strategies of promotion undermined the radical promise of the movement to summon forth new audiences and publics for art through radically revising its mode of distribution.<sup>xxxii</sup>

While *Audio Arts* responded to conceptual art's questioning of the institutional parameters of art, Furlong's aim in circulating information on art and artworks themselves was not oriented towards advertising individual artists to collectors. Compared to Siegelaub's economic incentives in disseminating information on the individual artists he represented as a dealer, Furlong was motivated more by a desire to create a heterogeneous space of discourse not driven by the promotion of a given artist, style or movement, one that would reflect the multiplicity of artistic practices that resulted from the breakdown of a hegemonic modernism imported into Great Britain from the United States. Rather than regarding circulation as a marketing strategy as Siegelaub did, Furlong deployed *Audio Arts* as a form of critical publicity to showcase artists whose work often stood in an oblique relationship to the art market, since

many of the artists he covered were concerned with discovering social roles and functions for art and artists beyond the production of saleable commodities. Instead of challenging the role of the gallery as a merchandiser of artworks, Siegelauub circumvented the brick-and-mortar location of the commercial gallery only to extend this very function through various circulating formats. Furlong, in contrast, emphasized that utilizing alternative situations to exhibit art could potentially reach audiences outside of mainstream art institutions or perhaps result in closer relationships between the artist and a given context or audience.

In an interview from *Studio International*, Furlong discusses the relationship between politically-committed artists and the gallery, and his description of the issues artists face exhibiting in galleries demonstrates the extent to which Siegelauub retained the traditional function of the gallery despite his use of different modes of exhibition: “The traditional gallery model, locked as it is within the equation: ARTIST / DEALER / DIRECTOR / BUYER / BROWSER, is inevitably linked to the cultural context it was evolved within. In this setting, the artist’s product is developed as currency, under appropriate marketplace conditions, using formulae that, combined with the general inaccessibility of the avant-garde, has ensured the sealing off from all but the art community.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Following conceptual art’s attempt to fundamentally alter art’s mode of distribution, Furlong regarded the combination of the cassette and the postal system as a means to circulate artistic works and conversations on art beyond the confines of mainstream arts institutions, which he hoped would reach publics that did not attend galleries and museums. Furlong, however, does not advocate abandoning the gallery altogether, as it “represents a potentially viable resource if extended into new models.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> He does not position *Audio Arts* as an exclusive alternative to exhibiting in museums and galleries but as yet another extension of such work. Therefore, his cassette magazine operated alongside arts

institutions rather than in strict opposition to them. With *Audio Arts*, Furlong did not aim to create an independent infrastructure for art (as cassette-sharing networks attempted to do with music, for example); instead, he used his “spoken magazine” as an instrument to promote politicized art practices that were attempting to reform the relationships between artist, institution, audience and society.

In focusing largely on speech and theoretical discussion, *Audio Arts* grew out of conceptual art’s privileging of the ideational content and linguistic dimensions of art over its visual actualization. In supplanting visual perception with language, conceptual art demystified artistic production (based no longer in exceptional studio skills but in everyday communication), which in turn produced a communicative relay between artist and spectator. In emphasizing the active role of the spectator in interpreting linguistic procedures, conceptual art consequently raised questions concerning the relationships between artist, work, site, and audience.<sup>xxxv</sup> In his writings, Furlong contends that the format of the audiocassette is distinctly suited for conceptual art’s linguistic turn since it can directly reproduce speech: “the retention of speech has remained a primary concern of *Audio Arts*, as it is often through verbal interaction that ideas and intentions are clarified and attitudes are formed.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> However, while conceptual art was believed to be more democratic and accessible based on its use of language and everyday materials (photos, text, etc.), the abstruse nature of its internal debates and its denial of visual pleasure often resulted in alienating spectators rather than attracting them. Indeed, low attendance figures at conceptual art exhibitions in London were all-too-common in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>xxxvii</sup> As Art & Language member Mel Ramsden wrote in 1975, conceptual art “was basically limited to insular-tautological spectacle...our mode of operation is ‘professionalized,’ specialized, autonomous, and essentially quaintly harmless (but essential) to the mode of operation of

market-structures.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Many critics and artists, including Charles Harrison, Joseph Kosuth, and Lucy Lippard, have described the ways in which conceptual art did not summon new audiences and publics through its “dematerialized” forms but rather appealed to an already initiated circle of participants who possessed extensive knowledge of the debates characterizing 20<sup>th</sup> century art.<sup>xxxix</sup> With *Audio Arts*, Furlong strove to combat the insularity of conceptual art by emphasizing the unique communicative capacities of spoken expression when compared with the complicated theoretical writings in art magazines: “Art journals are sometimes impenetrable because they are written from the specialist’s point of view and with lots of jargon. But specialists, whether they are sculptors or brain surgeons, tend to drop obscure terminology when talking. We go to an audience who wouldn’t buy the (art) magazines but can gain access through speech.”<sup>xl</sup> Furlong places great emphasis on the capacity of speech to cut through the various barriers of entry (educational, class, etc.) into art; by its very nature, Furlong contends, conversation distills complex ideas into a more relatable form, which could in turn open the institutionally circumscribed realm of art to a broader audience. Due to the fact that the cassette was a broadly available technology that directly records and plays back conversational speech as it was spoken, Furlong believed that it could circumvent the containment of art among a small group of professional specialists. However, Furlong’s contention that particular consequences will issue immediately from the nature of the medium itself must be interrogated, since it ascribes unique possibilities to the format without consideration of how it is used within specific contexts by particular individuals and groups. In order to understand Furlong’s belief in the democratic possibilities of communication via the audiocassette, it will be necessary to examine the ways in which speech and new media were understood in the 1970s.



On December 1, 1976, *Audio Arts* founder William Furlong led a workshop on cassette publishing as part of the Free International University (FIU) Symposium at University College in London. Entitled “Information Distribution on Audio Cassette,” his presentation focused on a potential use of the cassette that had yet to be fully explored: communication through speech.<sup>xli</sup> In 1976, the majority of cassettes were—and would remain—employed to reproduce pre-recorded music, with the conventional one-way transmission channel of producer→distributor→consumer desired by commercial media conglomerates remaining intact, despite the fact that the relatively new format presented radical possibilities for alternative models of production and distribution.<sup>xlii</sup> The introduction of the Philips compact cassette in 1963 opened up sound recording to a broader public of amateur consumers who did not need to possess the specialized knowledge to operate complex technical equipment such as a record lathe cutter or a larger reel-to-reel magnetic tape machine. In addition to the cassette’s ease of use, the shift from vacuum tube to transistor technology made sound reproduction more portable, bringing it out of the studio.<sup>xliii</sup> Relieved of the task of lugging around a cumbersome, heavy machine with delicate parts that required a considerable amount of maintenance, a person could conveniently transport a portable tape-deck hooked up to a microphone to record on-site at various locations, a task which Furlong carried out for decades in London as well as throughout Europe and America. With simple functions and a protective shell around the tape itself, operating a cassette machine was simple and straightforward, which introduced sound recording to a mass market and granted—at least potentially—a significant degree of latitude to the consumer.<sup>xliv</sup>

Yet, as Furlong points out, besides small groups of individuals who exchange experimental poetry, music, and audio letters on cassette, this freedom is rarely pursued: the

cassette's potential lies in wait as a resource that is "little realized and virtually untapped in this area of integrated technology." In his presentation, Furlong envisions the person equipped with a cassette machine as a node within a larger information network that functions on the principles of reciprocal exchange and two-way communication. Rather than the passive recipient of centralized transmissions from state- or corporate-sponsored media, one can now circumvent such intermediaries and communicate directly with other cultural producers: "two-way communication could become a primary feature of information exchange through the audio cassette. In this area both the receiver/audience and publisher/editor would exist in a dual structure based on participation and flow of information in both directions, rather than the one-way direction maintained at present by media within our culture."<sup>xlv</sup> Cassette communication, Furlong argues, could act as a "counter-force" to established media, creating the conditions for the formation of critical publics. Furlong's model of a communication network predicated on the decentralized circulation of information evokes a powerful technological imaginary that emerges in the 1960s and 1970s, as users of cassette and video envisioned a potentially democratic horizon of connectivity and agency in relation to new media.

Indeed, during this period the possibility of "two-way" communication introduced by cassette and video technology captivated artists, theorists, consumers and corporations alike. Groups such as Radical Software, the writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger, amateur musicians, and the Philips and Sony companies all welcomed the introduction of these technologies as new means through which media would become decentralized and democratized. Radio, television and film represented the 'old' media, since they were centrally-controlled, owned by bureaucratic organizations, produced by specialists and structured on a model of a sole transmitter broadcasting to many passive receivers. New media such as fax and photocopy

machines, personal computers, video and cassette challenged the hegemony of older media insofar as they contained a greater potential for user participation, interaction, control and collective production: the passive consumer of film, radio and television would be transformed into an active manager and/or producer of media, which would circulate along horizontal lines of exchange instead of the hierarchically organized mode of broadcast characterizing older media.<sup>xlvi</sup>

In 1970, Hans Magnus Enzensberger contributed “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” to the *New Left Review*, and it is clear that it served as an inspiration for Furlong’s presentation at the FIU. Drawing on Bertolt Brecht’s radio theory and Walter Benjamin’s writings on media, Enzensberger criticizes the New Left’s failure to seize the productive and communicative potential of new media (tape recorders, video cameras, etc.) to circulate information that opposes and contests what he defines as the dominant “consciousness industry.”<sup>xlvi</sup> According to Enzensberger, the consciousness industry seduces the masses into accepting the status quo through the entertainment provided by mass media and the ideological interpellations of the education system. The consciousness industry is a powerful instrument possessed by those in power that ensures the foreclosure of dissent and protest, and it works to convince the public to accept an unjust society while simultaneously profiting from this process.<sup>xlvi</sup> Enzensberger’s concept of the consciousness industry is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of the “culture industry” in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, yet he nevertheless condemns the tendency of intellectuals on the Left to regard media purely and exclusively as manipulation. “In the New Left’s opposition to the media,” Enzensberger writes, “old bourgeois fears such as the fear of ‘the masses’ seem to be reappearing along with equally old bourgeois longings for pre-industrial times dressed up in progressive

clothing.”<sup>xlix</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, the mass-produced culture of industrial capitalism is a symptom of the lack of freedom in everyday life, and the subjection it enforces leaves little room for subversion or resistance. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the very experiences that the culture industry denies—agency, creativity, happiness, etc.—cannot be obtained through the products it offers up.<sup>i</sup> Therefore, Adorno argues that resistance to the dominant order lies in autonomous works of art that internalize and embody the contradictions of an unequal and exploitative society while refusing to communicate on its terms—the works of Kafka, Schoenberg, and Beckett are representative of this tendency.<sup>li</sup> The idea that the industrialized and commercial means through which the culture industry manufactures passivity in the public could be reappropriated and utilized towards progressive ends does not play a role in his philosophical system (the closest Adorno comes to locating possible resistance in a specific technology is in his brief notes on the mimeograph in *Minima Moralia*, a device which, at the time of his writing, had already become obsolete).<sup>lii</sup> The consciousness industry, insofar as it dictates passivity and strives to mold the desires of the public to the operations of the capitalist market, shares similarities with Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry, yet Enzensberger refuses what he regards as Adorno and Horkheimer’s quietist and elitist position. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Enzensberger does not recoil from the horizon of industrial-commercial publicity, viewing new technologies such as video and the cassette as devices that must be harnessed to develop progressive strategies of counter-communication in order to prevent their incorporation by the consciousness industry. As Miriam Hansen writes, “With his emphasis on the dynamics of appropriation and reappropriation, [Enzensberger] shifted the discussion of mass cultural reception from terms like disintegration, isolation, and manipulation to a framework allowing for

the possibility of historically new and potentially democratic formations of publicity that emerged with the very media of consumption.”<sup>liii</sup>

What follows in “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” is an extensive analysis of the potentially emancipatory uses of new media that is both uncanny and prophetic, insofar as the basic distinctions he sets up—decentralization versus centralization; two-way transmitters versus reception-only receivers; mobility versus isolation; feedback and interactivity versus passivity; amateur collectivities versus professional specialists—characterize not only the media euphoria of the 1960s and 1970s but the technological utopianism of the 1990s as well. During the 1960s and 1970s, a range of technologies, from the Xerox machine to the video recorder, promised to grant an unprecedented degree of control to individuals, who could tailor their own media experiences, and in many respects the arrival of the Internet was understood in the same terms. The optimism surrounding the integration of computers into work and leisure apotheosized with the arrival of the Internet (and epitomized in the pages of *Wired* magazine), however, are markedly distinct from the socialist motivations of Enzensberger. While the introduction of user-controlled technologies in the 1970s and the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s share particular symbolic affinities, they occupied profoundly different historical horizons due to the consequences of neoliberalism (deregulation, the erosion of the welfare state, the increasing power of multinational corporations, globalization). Unlike Enzensberger, who regarded new communication and recording technologies as revolutionary means to produce socialist alternatives to the capitalist organization of information distribution, the digital utopianists of the 1990s (Kevin Kelley, Esther Dyson, George Gilder) viewed the capacities of the Internet as a way of finding agency *within* capitalism, not outside of it. In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*,

historian Fred Turner shows the ways in which the cyber-utopian rhetoric of the 1990s dovetailed all too easily with the designs and motivations of multinational corporations in the New Economy: the celebrated mobility the Internet offered meant that labor adapted to more precarious and temporary engagements (post-Fordism); the possibilities of user feedback led to consumer tracking and data mining by corporations; the promises of non-hierarchical communication and decentralization resulted in the consolidation of power in the form of vast networks owned by large technology companies.<sup>liv</sup>

In 1970, however, Enzensberger could not yet foresee the precise forms in which progressive tendencies contained in new media would be subsumed by the forces of the capitalist market, although he certainly indicates that the technical possibilities of two-way communication alone will not reform society: “Anyone who expects to be emancipated by technological hardware, or by a system of hardware however structured, is the victim of an obscure belief in progress. Anyone who imagines that freedom for the media will be established if only everyone is busy transmitting and receiving is the dupe of a liberalism which, decked out in contemporary colors, merely peddles the faded concepts of a preordained harmony of social interests.”<sup>lv</sup> As he makes clear, it is only with a clarity of purpose and sufficient strategy that social groups can utilize media to create a more equitable society, which differentiates his position from the technocrat’s faith in the innate progress of technological development. Without the proper socialist strategies and content, simply sending and receiving messages becomes an empty valorization of the technical possibilities of new media that ends up promoting experimentation for experimentation’s sake (Enzensberger lambasts the audio-visual experiments of the American counterculture for being apolitical). For Enzensberger, individuals who remain absorbed in amateur tinkering will not bring about political change: production must be collectivized and the

masses must engage in a “self-regulating learning process which is made possible by the electronic media.”<sup>lvi</sup> In “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” Enzensberger regards decentralization, two-way transmission, feedback, and interactivity as positive developments since they represent modes of production through which groups marginalized by the consciousness industry can wrest representational control from corporate and state power.

Enzensberger’s essay in *New Left Review* revises and updates Brecht’s “Radio as an Apparatus of Communication,” which was originally published in 1932.<sup>lvii</sup> Not unlike Furlong on the cassette, Brecht suggests that radio possesses an untapped potential, one suppressed by the weight of tradition and the enforced division between producers and consumers characterizing the capitalist system: “It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers.”<sup>lviii</sup> Brecht wrote “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication” immediately before National Socialism rose to power in Germany, which would utilize radio in an authoritarian way that barred the possibilities that Brecht had articulated. Instead of a non-hierarchical and decentralized network in which all nodes are active producers of meaning, National Socialism controlled all radio broadcasts through the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, which was led by Joseph Goebbels. In Brecht’s essay, radio would serve a didactic function in promoting socialism, “turning the audience not only into pupils but into teachers.” However, in the hands of National Socialism radio became a tool of fascist indoctrination. The fate of radio in

Germany should serve as a reminder that a medium is not inherently repressive or liberatory but subject to revision depending on the political and ideological forces that put it to use. In “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” Enzensberger recovers Brecht’s call to “let the listener speak as well as hear” and applies it to his own contemporary media landscape, which is marked by new technical possibilities.

According to Enzensberger, television and film are low feedback technologies insofar as they deny any exchange between transmitter and receiver (e.g., a person can switch the channel and raise the volume of the television set but cannot determine the flow of programming). Electronic media, at least potentially, present a different model of communication in which the binary distinction between passive receivers and active transmitters does not hold. While the technical possibilities of feedback in communication existed in the equipment of older media such as radio, Enzensberger argues that corporate and state control of radio foreclosed this potential. “Electronic techniques recognize no contradiction in principle between transmitter and receiver,” writes Enzensberger. “Every transistor radio is, by the nature of its construction, at the same time a potential transmitter; it can interact with other receivers by circuit reversal. The development from a mere distribution medium to a communications medium is technically not a problem. It is consciously prevented for understandable political reasons.”<sup>lix</sup> The consciousness industry requires productive capacities to be restricted in the hands of the few, who control the messages transmitted by media to vast populations of passive consumers. The asymmetry of this relationship speaks to the divide between the ruling class and the ruled class, and the reversibility made possible by new media could effectively end the disproportionate influence of the former on the latter: “the contradiction between producers and consumers is not inherent in the electronic media; on the contrary, it has to be artificially reinforced by economic and



administrative measures.”<sup>lx</sup> While radio contained the technical potential of reciprocal communication between transmitter and receiver, it took the path of many communication technologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards centralization and control by large corporate and bureaucratic entities. In 1970, Enzensberger did not regard this trajectory as the inevitable course for the various new communication mediums which were recently made available to the public due to their accessibility, ease of use, and incorporation into everyday life.

Enzensberger views the Left’s antipathy towards new media as poor political strategy: it is a symptom of the ossified nature of the Party structure in socialism as well as the educational privileges of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In Europe, socialism utilizes newspapers and journals to circulate information: “these newssheets presuppose a structure of party members and sympathizers and a situation, where the media are concerned, that roughly corresponds to the historical situation in 1900.”<sup>lxi</sup> Since the socialist movement refuses to engage with the new productive forces of the consciousness industry, it fails to increase its avenues of communication with individuals and groups who inhabit the contemporary media landscape. According to Enzensberger, bourgeois intellectuals who critique new media do so to preserve their own prestige and distinction: “Potentially, the new media do away with all educational privileges and thereby with the cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligentsia. This is one of the reasons for the intelligentsia’s resentment against the new industry.”<sup>lxii</sup> For Enzensberger, electronic media do not possess the bourgeois class character of book learning and knowledge since they do not require formal education. In a section entitled “The Supersession of Written Culture,” Enzensberger describes how new media will liquidate the private, contemplative, and tradition-bound realm of writing and reading with a collective, active and experimental mode of absorbing and disseminating information.

In 1971, Jean Baudrillard responded to Enzensberger's essay in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. In "Requiem for the Media," Baudrillard criticizes Enzensberger for presupposing an inherent communicative structure to new media, one that is more open due to the possibility of reversing sender and receiver. As Enzensberger writes, "The new media are egalitarian in structure. Anyone can take part in them by a simple switching process."<sup>lxiii</sup> For Enzensberger, the formal possibilities contained in technologies such as the video recorder and cassette—with passive consumers becoming active producers—would create the conditions for political mobilization and an expanded sense of collectivity, one not necessarily grounded in face-to-face encounters but constituted through the circulation of information. In contrast to Enzensberger, Baudrillard argues that media serve a different social function, which is to isolate individuals and groups from one another and foreclose any possibility of what he defines as "reciprocity." According to Baudrillard, reciprocity disrupts the axes through which communication in media is understood, erasing the distinction between sender and receiver and allowing more radical forms of interaction. In the model of communication inherited from systems theory (transmitter-message-receiver), Baudrillard argues that there is no room for the contingencies and ambiguities of embodied dialogue: "This 'scientific' construction is rooted in a *simulation* model of communication. It excludes, from its inception, the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange."<sup>lxiv</sup> For Baudrillard, reciprocity cannot occur at a distance, as it requires a shared presence in the here and now. In his essay, Enzensberger criticized the students of May '68 for deploying what he called "archaic forms of production": the students printed posters on hand presses instead of using a modern offset press, hand-painted political slogans instead of stenciling them, and seized the Odéon Theatre instead of the radio. By failing to intervene in the advanced means of communication at

their disposal, Enzensberger argues, the students of May '68 vastly diminished the political impact of the protests. Baudrillard disagrees with Enzensberger's assessment, arguing that during May '68 the street itself became the primary site of political resistance: "The real revolutionary media during May were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and hand-painted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged—everything that was an immediate inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic."<sup>lxv</sup> For Baudrillard, Enzensberger's decentralized network of active producers may invert the structure of media but it does not erase the structure itself, which separates individuals and groups from one another. Media, by the nature of their transmission-at-a-distance, is defined by Baudrillard as a "Platonic screen," enticing individuals with the mirage of participatory communication while strictly enforcing their atomization.

Baudrillard's antagonistic response to Enzensberger's essay can be understood as a skeptical antidote to the generalized euphoria that characterized the introduction of new media in the 1960s and 1970s. As outlined above, new communications technologies were welcomed by many as instruments of individual and collective liberation since devices such as photocopy and fax machines, video cameras, and cassette recorders opened the production of media to a broader public. Due to the increasing presence of media in everyday life, revolutionary changes in the operational structure of media led some to believe that social change would issue as a result of these transformations. Moreover, Marshall McLuhan—who became new media's prophet and ideologue—wagered that communications technologies were creating an interconnected "global village" of instantaneous contact between individuals, which would produce unprecedented conditions for shared perception and cooperation. As McLuhan writes, "the aspiration of our times for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is the natural adjunct of electrical

technology. There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude—a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being.”<sup>lxvi</sup> While Enzensberger criticized a blind faith in the capacities and properties of technical equipment itself, according to Baudrillard he still ascribes an almost messianic potential to communication technologies: “Clearly what we have here is an extension of the same schema assigned, since time immemorial, from Marx to Marcuse, to productive forces and technology: they are the promise of human fulfillment, but capitalism freezes or confiscates them. They are liberatory, but it is necessary to liberate them.”<sup>lxvii</sup> While Enzensberger does argue that the use of new media to effectively alter the distribution of communication in society requires a significant degree of organization and strategy, Baudrillard still accuses him of a tempered form of technological determinism due to his overemphasis on the reversibility of circuits in various communication technologies. Instead, Baudrillard contends, an analysis of media in advanced capitalist society should not hypostatize technical possibilities but rather tend to how media function socially and ideologically.

However, as media historian Douglas Kellner points out, Baudrillard himself engages in a form of technological determinism when he dystopically inverts McLuhan’s thesis in arguing that media serve only to distance individuals from one another and segment society. Baudrillard condemns media through a type of formalism—that it requires distance between transmitting parties—while giving no credence to how meaning can operate in alternative media structures. If all media communication is understood negatively as alienation and manipulation *tout court*, then there is no room for evaluating different modes and uses of media.<sup>lxviii</sup> In “Requiem for the Media,” Baudrillard pits a monolithic media rooted in simulation and separation against an idealized form of face-to-face communication. While his argument that political resistance necessitates the actual co-presence of people in a physical location serves as a reminder of the

limits of media's emancipatory potential, Baudrillard's totalizing account of media echoes Habermas's cynical assessment of publicity, insofar as both Baudrillard and Habermas imagine no alternative for the function of media in society. Itself a product of social and historical processes, media is theorized as an abstraction: permanent rather than subject to revision, media operates quasi-autonomously beyond the threat of intervention by those it manipulates and controls. Baudrillard erects a rigid opposition between "true" communication in the here and now and "false" communication via media that leaves little room for the nuance and complexity of how individuals and groups can exchange information at a distance that can in turn produce material effects in the world. What Enzensberger, Negt and Kluge, and Furlong all share in common is the belief that media communication is labile and multivalent rather than fixed and uniform. Moreover, media is understood as an integral component of everyday life rather than a simulated reflection of it, which is an insight that opens onto the possibility of transforming how it functions and whose interests it serves. With *Audio Arts*, Furlong demonstrated that media are open to alternative and unanticipated uses, insofar as he attempted to renegotiate the character of communication and the distribution of information through advanced technological means. Instead of retreating from the horizon of industrial-commercial publicity, Furlong strategically situated *Audio Arts* within it, showing that media can be utilized beyond the prism of manipulation and distraction towards politically progressive ends.

One dimension of Enzensberger's essay that Furlong picks up on in his presentation at the FIU is the distinction made between writing and speech. Enzensberger characterizes writing as a "highly formalized technique" that many are excluded from due to unequal access to education as well as the social rules governing written expression (grammar, syntax, spelling). The video camera and cassette are not bound to the codes of written expression, therefore they

will allow a liberated flow of communication unhindered by the stratifications and barriers of writing: “microphone and camera abolish the class character of the mode of production (not of the production itself). The normative rules become unimportant. Oral interviews, arguments, demonstrations, neither demand orthography or ‘good writing.’”<sup>lxi</sup> In his writings and interviews, Furlong clearly follows Enzensberger’s belief that speech—recorded and disseminated with new electronic and electromagnetic technologies—is a more open and egalitarian form of communication than writing. Enzenberger contends that while printed media will not necessarily disappear under the weight of new means of electronic communication, the latter will inevitably usurp the authority and dominance of the former.

In his presentation at the FIU, Furlong contends that the phenomenal qualities of listening to recorded speech distinguish it from reading printed media. While not mentioned by name in his FIU workshop, the theologian Walter Ong—whose thesis was supervised by Marshall McLuhan—clearly influenced Furlong’s ideas on how speech communicated through electronic means could bring speakers and listeners closer to each other when compared with print. McLuhan, as a theorist of the effects of technology on consciousness, focused several of his studies on the consequences of the printing press, declaring in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that “print is the technology of individualism.”<sup>lxx</sup> For McLuhan, to engage with a text involved a withdrawal from the social world in the solitary act of reading, a premise that Ong would expand on in *Orality and Literacy*, a study concerning the impact of literacy and print culture on society and thought. It is worth quoting Furlong in full from his presentation at the FIU, since it indicates the ways in which he regarded speech as a form of communication that could circumvent social divisions, in turn opening the increasingly circumscribed domain of post-conceptual art (a world of galleries, dealers, artists, and art schools) to new audiences and publics:

As a method for the exchange of ideas, attitudes and information based on the primary activity of most human beings, (recorded) speech offers close contact with original sources on an intimate kind of 'pre-literate' social basis. Coded methods of communication, as in the case of printed text, are absent and the receiver is brought into close proximity with the information source. The processes involved in receiving such information relate more to personal interactive methods where impressing and learning take place in a non-linear [manner]. As speech tends to be less dense than prepared text this gives substance to the notion of speech acting as a common denominator both through and across the various levels of specialization within social groups.<sup>lxxi</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, many artists wanted to escape the confinement of art museums and galleries by situating their work in public contexts, collaborating with communities who were generally not represented in mainstream arts institutions, and altering art's mode of distribution. The introduction of new media such as video and cassette was met initially with a sense of technological euphoria: here were unprecedented means placed at the artist's disposal that did not have the high-cultural connotations of painting and sculpture. Moreover, since the use of video and cassette technology did not require extensive knowledge or training, these tools were understood to be more "democratic" than other artistic forms. Furlong's statements at the FIU combine this optimism regarding new media—an optimism that did not hold for many artists, especially figures such as Mary Kelly and Conrad Atkinson—with a quasi-religious privileging of the living word over the dead letter.<sup>lxxii</sup> To understand Furlong's belief that speech recorded onto the cassette and distributed through the postal system could potentially reach audiences outside of mainstream arts institutions, it is necessary to turn to the writings of Walter Ong, particularly his idea that the increasing predominance of electronic media over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century recovered lost dimensions of "orality" that had been displaced with the rise of print culture.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong examines the impact print literacy has had on human consciousness through analyzing phenomena ranging from the introduction of the alphabet to Greek culture to the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Not unlike McLuhan, Ong argues that print is a technology, and his popularization of the idea that the form language takes—spoken face-to-face, written, broadcast at a distance, etc.—impacts how we process such communication echoes McLuhan’s dictum that “the medium is the message.” *Orality and Literacy* argues that print literacy transformed human consciousness, irrevocably changing patterns and styles of thought and expression. Ong begins his historical schema with what he calls “primary orality,” a way of speaking and thinking that preceded the introduction of writing. According to Ong, cultures untouched by print literacy share particular characteristics: memory and memorization are more important due to the absence of writing; storytelling and repetition are crucial factors in the transmission of narrative history; communication is located in the here and now rather than outsourced to documentation and bureaucracy; social interaction is more participatory and situational. For Ong, speech is the very foundation of language, and he points out that many spoken languages exist independently of writing, while the inverse is impossible. Speech is understood as natural communication, which the artificial construction of writing corrupts and alters irreversibly. With the arrival of writing, communication becomes private, objective, distant, and linear: silent reading by an individual supplants vocal performance before a group, documents replace testimony, circulating texts supplant face-to-face encounters, and the sequential ordering of thought supersedes recursive expression. Throughout *Orality and Literacy*, Ong compares the collective dimensions of orality with the individualizing effects of writing: “Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication



unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> The “primary orality” that Ong describes before the arrival of writing is rooted in the face-to-face encounter between speaker and listener(s): “the word in its natural, oral habitat is a part of a real, existential present. Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> Reading Ong’s account of the arrival of print literacy, one might assume that the dimensions of oral culture that he describes are lost forever; however, towards the end of *Orality and Literacy* Ong contends that due to new communications technologies societies are experiencing an era of “secondary orality” that revives certain features of oral cultures. According to Ong, “secondary orality” does not entail a wholesale return to “primary orality” but blunts the impact of print on human consciousness by connecting individuals through sound and the voice. Print leaves an indelible impression on the human sensorium, but communication via radio, television and the Internet re-communalizes the individuals who have been divided by the various barriers of print culture. In Ong’s schema, print allows communication to span great distances, obviating the need for face-to-face encounters and producing social connections that are less personal and mediated by bureaucracy. With the advent of radio and television, however, Ong contends that specific characteristics of “oral culture” return to the forefront of human interaction insofar as these broadcasting mechanisms connect individuals and groups not through the artificial medium of print but through the voice, which is understood to be the most natural mode of human expression.

Ong’s concept of “secondary orality” can be compared to Marshall McLuhan’s idea of a “global village” created through electronic media, insofar as they both posit that new technologies determine modes of socialization that recall pre-modern historical periods.

Electronic forms of communication collapse space and time, producing instantaneous interactions between geographically dispersed subjects. McLuhan celebrates how electronic communication greatly accelerates the flow of information, which brings individuals closer together. Since he understands technologies as extensions of the human sensorium, McLuhan tends to naturalize them, privileging immediacy over mediation and proximity over distance. In relating electronic media to “primary orality,” Ong repeats McLuhan’s optimism regarding technology’s capacity to return *society* to its origins in *community*. Ong writes that “with telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of ‘secondary orality.’ This new orality has striking resemblance to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas.”<sup>lxxv</sup> According to Ong and McLuhan, print separates individuals from one another, and the spread of voices and bodies through electronic media will once again restore those fragmented by the reign of print to the unity and involvement of oral cultures.

Both Ong and McLuhan engage in a type of technological determinism, one that stops short of exploring the social, political, economic and institutional frameworks in which communication takes place while placing great emphasis on its phenomenal characteristics. In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, cultural historian Raymond Williams critiques what he describes as McLuhan’s “formalism.” “The media were never really seen as practices,” Williams argues. “All specific practice was subsumed by an arbitrarily assigned psychic function, and this had the effect of dissolving not only specific but general intentions...All media operations are in effect desocialised; they are simply physical events in an abstracted sensorium, and are distinguishable only by their variable sense-ratios.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Both Ong and McLuhan argue

that in oral cultures hearing was the dominant sense. With the emergence of print, they contend, the primacy of hearing in the “ratio of the senses”—which both assume to be the “natural” state of the human sensorium—is usurped by vision. At first glance, Ong and McLuhan appear to be historicizing perception, inasmuch as the human sensorium is analyzed not as an immutable physiological substratum but rather profoundly influenced by external forces. In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin makes a similar point: *“Just as the entire mode of existence of human collective changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.”*<sup>lxxvii</sup> However, as Williams points out, for McLuhan technology is the *only* factor conditioning perception, and the social processes through which technologies are produced, introduced to society, and consumed or utilized by individuals and groups are neglected entirely. As Williams remarks, in contemporary society technological development is driven largely by corporations, which negotiate and pursue the interests of military, political and commercial power. McLuhan himself became a savvy spokesman for the communications industries emerging in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely because he uncritically celebrated their advances without drawing attention to the dominant forces driving their incorporation into everyday life. Indeed, the sentence following the passage quoted above—“The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by *history* [my emphasis]”—indicates the gulf between Benjamin’s materialist approach to changes in human perception and McLuhan’s technological determinism.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In McLuhan’s idea of a “global village,” Williams argues, “the physical fact of instant transmission, as a technical possibility, has been raised to a social fact, without any pause to notice that virtually all such transmission is at once selected and controlled by existing social authorities.”<sup>lxxix</sup> The institutions and social practices that govern the use of technologies do not

play a role in McLuhan's abstract causal relationship between media and perception: transcending the realm of their concrete utilization in society, media function in McLuhan's theoretical schema as a type of unmoved mover, altering the way we interface with the world without belonging to it. The "arbitrarily assigned psychic function[s]" McLuhan prescribes to various media is reiterated by Ong, who similarly draws up a series of categorical distinctions between hearing and seeing that are isolated from historical processes.

In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, historian Jonathan Sterne describes what he calls Ong's "audio-visual litany," in which sound and vision are held to be ontologically discrete categories of experience based on their allegedly 'natural' phenomenal properties. Sterne argues that Ong's approach to analyzing sound *dehistoricizes* it, since it ignores the ways in which sense experience is always embedded in social relations of production and consumption. By hypostatizing the different registers of visual and aural experience, Ong treats them in isolation from the actually existing circumstances in which they occur. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong erects a series of distinctions between vision and hearing to extend his point that print separates individuals while speech unites them. Once again, sense experience transcends history, leading Ong to construct simplistic binary oppositions that position the human observer in a hypothetical dimension in which the way one sees or one hears is determined exclusively by the physical characteristics of sonic and visual stimuli. Sterne formulates Ong's "litany" as follows:

hearing is spherical, vision is directional; hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object; hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces; hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it; hearing places us inside an event, seeing gives us perspective on the event; hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity; hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us

towards atrophy and death; hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect; hearing is primarily a temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense; hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, vision is a sense that removes us from it.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Ong arrives at his concept of “secondary orality” through this series of binary distinctions between hearing and seeing. In theorizing the communicative capacities of the cassette, Furlong reiterates Ong’s “audio-visual litany” to emphasize how recorded speech can dissolve the distancing effects of the printed word and potentially open conversation on contemporary art to audiences beyond the confines of art institutions.

Sound recording, Furlong argues, can bring the listener into a close relationship with the original act of enunciation or performance—unlike a text, which goes through a refining process in editing and transcription, an audio recording allows the listener to enter into the real duration of an event committed to tape, which is reproduced anew each time during playback. As Furlong writes, “The attraction for the artist working with recorded sound no doubt resided in its characteristic of maintaining an integrity with regard to the relationship between the moment of recording and the subsequent hearing. The psychophysical and acoustic nature of the recording itself is structurally re-entered in real time by a listener on subsequent occasions.”<sup>lxxxi</sup> According to Furlong, sound requires duration to exist and has a closer relationship to the original event than any printed version of it, connecting the viewer directly to the individual speaking or performing in a way that textual or photographic documentation can only approximate since these forms arrest and fix lived time. Furlong grants a privileged status to speech and sound in a way that rehearses Ong’s “audio-visual litany” above, which leads him to hastily infer conclusions about how *Audio Arts* will function in the world from the phenomenal properties of the medium itself. The form of *Audio Arts*, not the content contained therein, will determine how it is received: since speech tends to be less polished and complex than writing, Furlong claims,

then it will have greater communicative capacities. Moreover, since recorded sound consists of a material impress from the original source and does not go through the detour of symbolic inscription (what Furlong describes as “distancing filters”), the receiver will therefore experience a more direct relationship to the person speaking or performing.

By contending that specific consequences will follow from the capacities of the medium itself, Furlong isolates *Audio Arts* from history and society in much the same way that McLuhan and Ong do in their studies of how technologies affect human consciousness and influence patterns of social interaction. McLuhan and Ong fail to analyze the ways in which mediums are always determined by the institutional forces that put them to use and how they relate to specific social practices, favoring instead an approach that prescribes inevitable consequences from their physical or phenomenal characteristics. Furlong overestimates the capacity of speech and sound to function in ways that are diametrically opposed to print media, and in so doing he neglects to acknowledge the actually existing networks in which his cassette magazine functioned. In “The Artists’ Book Goes Public,” an essay published in *Art in America* in 1977, Lucy Lippard offers a compelling insight into the faulty logic behind the valorization of new modes of communication in advanced art of the 1960s and 1970s, one that can be applied to Furlong’s theorization of the cassette: “One of the basic mistakes by early proponents of Conceptual art’s ‘democratic’ stance (myself included) was a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience).”<sup>lxxxii</sup> Recorded speech alone disseminated via the audiocassette, independent of content and context, does not guarantee an expanded audience or public. Combining Enzensberger’s argument that speech is not restricted by the same linguistic codes as written expression and Ong’s belief that oral communication brings

individuals closer together, Furlong understands (recorded) speech as inherently more open, direct, and communicative. By inferring conclusions about how *Audio Arts* will function in society from the medium alone, he neglects to critically explore the path of *Audio Arts* among the social groups that engage with it and the sites in which it circulates. The extent to which *Audio Arts* could reach publics beyond mainstream art institutions was limited by the nature of the content contained on the cassettes that Furlong circulated and the types of individuals and audiences that would seek out theoretical debates on advanced art. While the cassette contained the formal possibility of reaching audiences beyond the circumscribed domain of museums and galleries because it was cheap and accessible, these qualities of the medium did not immediately result in *Audio Arts* circulating beyond an already existing infrastructure of contemporary art.

From the standpoint of the present, when everyday life is increasingly characterized by widespread use of complex communications technologies such as smartphones and computers, it is somewhat amusing to imagine the cassette as a technologically advanced medium, yet when it arrived it was understood as a radical device that opened the production of media to a broader public of amateurs. The prevalence of digital and electromagnetic technologies in the 1970s indicate a fundamental shift in the character of media: “classical” media such as radio, film, and television, which require little to no involvement on the part of the user, give way to participatory media such as the cassette, video, and, eventually, computer technology, which grant individuals the opportunity to program and produce their own media experiences. While individuals are offered little room to intervene in the time-structure of “classical” media, the new media of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged active engagement with the actual mechanisms of media production. Media, then, become an integral component of everyday life, which at once grants individuals and groups the opportunity to produce “counterproductions” rooted in their

own experience while also allowing powerful media companies to harvest information on and attention from these individuals and groups. Certainly, with the arrival of videotape, cassette, cable/satellite broadcasting, and computers, it is clear that media technologies become sites of production and consumption simultaneously. Instead of viewing media *exclusively* as the means through which corporate and state power ensures its domination, Negt and Kluge regard new technological means as potential sites of struggle over how experience is organized and understood. The various media analyzed by Negt and Kluge, while generated by the capitalist process and intended to be controlled by dominant institutions, are not closed circuits but open to strategic interventions and unanticipated implementations. Media technologies, then, are fundamentally ambivalent: they can either be used as instruments of hierarchical control by those in power or mediums for disseminating knowledge and fostering communication within a fluid network. With *Audio Arts*, Furlong wanted to produce an alternative use for the cassette, which would be deployed as a low-cost and flexible format that permitted reciprocal exchanges within a decentralized network of active producers.

As Michael Newman argues in *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium*, when video was made accessible to the public a techno-utopian discourse begins to surround its use: power in communication would be transferred from institutions to individuals, and consumers would be granted a “newfound agency to program their own cultural experiences rather than merely choosing from among a small set of culturally degraded options offered through the limited commercial channels.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> While video was initially synonymous with television during the 1950s, the introduction of portable video equipment such as the Sony CV-2000 in 1965 and the Sony DV-2400 in 1967 led to video’s differentiation from television, which was associated with powerful studios and institutions. In contrast, the video camera gave non-experts the access



to the means of television production in a portable form, which meant that viewers could produce and watch content independently of the major networks. In commercials, magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, video was understood as an instrument that would diminish the control centralized networks had on people's media experiences. As Newman writes, "Video promised to liberate and empower viewers and to democratize mass media."<sup>xxxiv</sup> A sampling of the taglines from commercials advertising video consumer products—"Make Your Own TV Schedule," "Start Your Own Network"—underscores the ways in which these technologies were understood to activate formerly passive television viewers. Video allowed people to view television programs when they pleased, but it could also record everyday life as well as important political and historical events. Therefore, it was also regarded as a tool of civic engagement and democratic participation that could provide more genuine representations of the world than those provided by television and film, which had the financial backing of large corporations or governments.

In articulating a critical framework for *Audio Arts* and the cassette more generally, Furlong engaged with the various hopes and aspirations many ascribed to a range of new media in the 1960s and 1970s. The cassette, not unlike video, could be used in a decentralized communication network; through the direct impress of the event or voice onto the tape, the cassette could provide a sense of immediacy to the listener; since the cassette was cheap and portable, Furlong believed that it would be more accessible to the public than the objects exhibited in galleries, the events taking place in arts institutions, and the theoretical discussions printed in art magazines and journals. Indeed, Furlong's vision of the cassette's use by independent, autonomous producers is echoed among various technologies during this period. Marshall McLuhan proclaimed that "the Xerox makes everyone a publisher"; offset and mimeo

reproduction, which were cheap and accessible to non-specialists, were instrumental in the creation of alternative and underground presses; the Portapak camera granted amateur users an unprecedented latitude to create their own media representations. Therefore, it is necessary to relate the cassette to a range of technologies that promised to democratize and decentralize media in the 1960s and 1970s. In his study of video, Newman argues against medium-specificity, insisting that a medium should be understood relationally, “according to how it is constituted through its complementarity or distinction to other media within a wider ecology of technologies, representations, and meanings. A medium is...understood in terms not only of its materiality, affordances, and conventions of usage, but also of everyday, commonsense ideas about its cultural status in a given historical context.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> A medium is therefore always more than the sum of its technical capacities, as it can embody different meanings depending on the way in which it is utilized and understood by various groups in different contexts. The cassette should be considered as both material device and symbolic metaphor, as a medium equipped with particular technical capacities but also functioning as the representational site of cultural possibilities, anticipations, and meanings.

From the moment of its introduction, the cassette was understood as a technology through which a significant degree of control was granted to consumers: to create their own music, to record mixes of pre-recorded music, and to pirate copyrighted music broadcast on radio or sold in stores. Nevertheless, for most users it was simply another delivery mechanism for music owned by record companies that did not fundamentally alter the structure of the music industry in developed nations. While my primary interest in this chapter is in the alternative uses of the cassette by *Audio Arts*, it is important to emphasize that these remained marginal practices that in no way characterized the prevailing modes of usage among the general population. As Lev

Manovich remarks in “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?” academic studies of user-created media content “give disproportional attention to certain genres such as youth media, activist media, and political mashups, which are indeed important but do not represent more typical usage by hundreds of millions of people.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> In order to avoid fetishizing the cassette as an inherently progressive medium, it is important to note its dominant uses and how it functioned in practice among the general population (and the same methodology should hold for other “participatory” media). While the format of the cassette did offer the potential for new modes of production and distribution, the disappointing reality is that these possibilities were rarely pursued by most people. A medium, then, should be understood as contingent, contextual and fundamentally unstable, defined more concretely by the social, economic and ideological networks in which it functions than its material format alone.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of new technologies often follows a similar arc of promise and decline: an initial sense of euphoric optimism concerning the new possibilities contained in the technical equipment itself—to improve society, to promote human connectivity, to liberate individuals from hierarchical control—followed by the inevitably disappointing results that arise from its actual implementation in society—increased colonization of everyday life by corporations, mass surveillance of populations by consolidated power, individuals stitched ever more tightly into calculable patterns of consumption. In short, radical possibility is followed by capitalist instrumentality, a pattern of development that historian Tim Wu characterizes as “the Cycle” in *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*, a study of the monopolistic tendencies in communications industries over the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the present.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> There is a particular appeal to the idea that there may be a technological

solution to problems that are fundamentally political, social, and economic, which is certainly why a pronounced sense of euphoria often greets the arrival of new technologies (a euphoria which is often shot through with anxieties as well). By privileging the technical possibilities presented by various new media as if immediate consequences will issue from them, however, our attention is drawn away from the fact that new technologies are always embedded in historical processes and social practices.

The optimism regarding new media's ability to fundamentally alter the structure of communication—and, by extension, society itself—in the 1960s and 1970s was in part a result of the failure to understand the extent to which the introduction of new communication technologies was always on the terms of corporations and government regulators. Moreover, these corporate and bureaucratic organizations often exploited the allegedly decentralizing and democratizing effects of new technologies in order to promote their own agendas. As stated above, new media were understood as revolutionary insofar as they granted an unprecedented autonomy to amateur producers. However, by hypostatizing the formal structure of media and analyzing the user in isolation from larger historical and political forces, one neglects to examine whose interests are served by the general use of these technologies. As Newman writes, "Revolution talk...functions to shift interest from the objectives of powerful institutions and individuals who benefit from the commercial fortunes of media and electronics, to the people whose interests are supposedly to be served by technological improvement, and whose participation in technological innovation as enthusiastic consumers is often necessary to satisfy the objectives of corporations and states. Revolution talk bathes media and technology in a glow of optimistic promise and thrill, but it is typically devoid of authentic critical perspective or historical understanding."<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Rather than overstating their technical potential, it is important to

view technologies such as the video and cassette as caught in a dialectic of liberation and control from their very inception, at once granting their users greater latitude to produce, select and distribute content while also signaling the encroachment of the market—in the form of media companies and consumer electronics—into every aspect of life. The history of technological development, then, should be understood not simply a trajectory of radical technical possibility followed by political neutralization at the hands of corporate and state power but an ongoing political struggle between prescribed, dominant uses from above and improvised, alternative uses from below. As Raymond Williams states in his study of television, the current configuration of media may be determined by corporate and bureaucratic forces but it should not be considered as settled on all accounts:

Determination is a real social process, but never (as in some theological and some Marxist versions) as a wholly controlling, wholly predicting set of causes. On the contrary, the reality of determination is the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures, within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled. We have to think of determination not as a single force, or as a single abstraction of forces, but as a process in which real determining factors—the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups—set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

When analyzing *Audio Arts*, one might notice that the actual uses of new technologies by even the most radical practitioners often falls short of the revolutionary promises they are believed to contain. As a critical alternative media practice, *Audio Arts* documented and circulated events and discussions that received little attention in the dominant arts publications in London, yet it generally did not operate on the principle of “two-way” communication that Furlong describes in his FIU presentation. In most issues of *Audio Arts*, Furlong interviews and

records artists, dubs these discussions to cassette, and subsequently sends tapes to the universities, libraries, art schools, and bookstores that placed orders. With few exceptions in the history of *Audio Arts*, the model of a decentralized network of independent producers exchanging information that Furlong presents at the FIU remained a rhetorical figure, not a functional reality (one notable exception to *Audio Arts*'s general mode of publishing was its contribution to the 1983 Hayward Annual, in which blank cassettes were sent to a number of people who were asked to record a brief description of the space they use regularly and an object in it; the responses were then broadcast by radio stations in different countries, and the transmissions were heard by visitors to the exhibition). Nevertheless, it would be somewhat unfair to evaluate *Audio Arts* exclusively in relation to Furlong's utopian hopes for the ways in which the cassette might be utilized. *Audio Arts* did serve as a virtual meeting-point for the exchange of ideas concerning recent forms of experimental and politicized art practices that were marginalized at the time, aligning it with the rise of artists' magazines and alternative spaces. During the 1960s and 1970s, artists' magazines and alternative spaces created new contexts for exhibiting and distributing art that expanded artists' control over their own work, mitigated the demand to transform their work into saleable commodities, while also supporting artists' political engagements and fighting for their legal rights. As Gwen Allen argues, magazines and alternative spaces operated in tandem as alternative sites of publicity that served as the basis for the formation of "counterpublics" that contested "the social and economic exclusivity of the mainstream art world and...forge[d] new artistic identities and criteria."<sup>xc</sup> While *Audio Arts* did not generally take the form of the "two-way communication" described by Furlong, it still managed to disseminate content that challenged the dominant forms of art displayed in commercial galleries and public museums (museums which, in London, were generally under

state control), offering a valuable medium in which debate and discussion on the social and political roles of art and artists could be circulated among various audiences. Ultimately, the idea of “two-way” communication should be understood as both technical fact and symbolic figure, as a literal capacity of specific technologies but also a rhetorical means by which Furlong and others articulated potential alternatives to the control of information by corporate and governmental power.

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<sup>i</sup> The *Audio Arts* archive is currently housed at the Tate Britain in London. The Tate digitized every release of Furlong's "spoken magazine," which are now available on the Tate website: <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts>. In 2010, Phaidon published *Speaking of Art*, a collection of transcribed interviews with artists that first appeared on *Audio Arts* cassettes. See William Furlong, *Speaking of Art: Four decades of art in conversation* (London: Phaidon, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Statement by William Furlong in "Art Magazines," *Studio International*, Vol. 192, No. 982 (September/October 1976).

<sup>iii</sup> Graham Bartlett, "Interview with William Furlong, Editor of Audio Arts," *3JJJ*, Sydney, Australia, August 1981. Audio Arts Archive, Tate Britain, Box 8, TGA 200414/2/128.

<sup>iv</sup> John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 22-25.

<sup>v</sup> Across the Atlantic, artists also responded to similar issues through creating alternative spaces and improvising means of support. However, New York was defined more by its thriving commercial gallery system than London. For an historical account of alternative spaces in New York, see Julie Ault, *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> Graham Bartlett, "Interview with William Furlong."

<sup>vii</sup> Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 1-8.

<sup>viii</sup> Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum*, September 1968; Jack Burnham, "Real Time Systems," *Artforum*, September 1969.

<sup>ix</sup> Lucia Farinati, "Interview with William Furlong," conducted on the occasion of *William Furlong Audio Arts: extraction, construction, abstraction*, exhibition at the Sound Art Museum, Rome, 2006.

<sup>x</sup> Graham Bartlett, "Interview with William Furlong."

<sup>xi</sup> Germano Celant, "The Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art," in *The Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art*, exh. cat. (Fort Worth: Fort Worth Art Museum, 1977), 16. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Celant foregrounds the immediacy of sound recording, an interpretation of aural phenomena that informed Furlong's own theorization of his "spoken magazine": "By faithfully reproducing actual sounds or noises, the record extends the dimensions of aural writing and offers something closer to the physical and tactile experience which is lost when actions, performances, or environmental productions are reported only in documents or visual recordings. The sensation that performers and events are sharing the same space as the listener is a step towards audio-tactile integration in art work. The record directly "touches" almost everyone in that it presents a collection of noises and acoustic communications between the performer and the hearer which can recreate part of the psychophysical experience



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of the event itself. Thus the art product is immediately refined by the addition of the record, and a sensorial, acoustic/aural component is re-achieved.”

<sup>xii</sup> In addition to the magazine *Avalanche* (which will be discussed below), Andy Warhol’s *Interview* also wished to preserve the informal character of speech in the interviews that were transcribed for its pages. Warhol infamously called his portable tape recorder his “wife,” and his *a*, *A Novel* consisted of word-for-word transcriptions of conversations he recorded from 1965-67.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, 24.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>xv</sup> Jackson Pollock, “Answers to a Questionnaire,” *Arts and Architecture*, LXI, February 1944.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Volume: Bed of Sound* (MoMA, 2000); *Bitstreams* (Whitney Museum, 2001); *Art>Music* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2001); *Sonic Process* (Pompidou, 2002); *Sounding Spaces* (I.C.C., Tokyo, 2003); *See This Sound* (Lentos Art Museum, 2009); *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (MoMA, 2013).

<sup>xviii</sup> Interview with Lucia Farinati, *William Furlong Audio Arts*.

<sup>xix</sup> *Off the Record: The Legacy of Audio Arts Magazine in Contemporary Art*, conference at the Tate Britain, October 13, 2012. Video recording available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/off-the-record>.

<sup>xx</sup> “Sound has never become a distinct or discrete area of art practice such as other manifestations and activities were to become in the 1960s and 1970s. Although it has been used consistently by artists throughout this century, there has never been an identifiable group working exclusively in sound, so one is not confronted with an area of art practice labelled ‘sound art’ in the same way as one might be with categories such as Pop art, Minimal art, Land art, body art, video art, and so on. Another factor is the diversity of functions and roles that sound has occupied within various artists’ work. This failure of sound to construct a distinct category for itself has in fact proved an advantage, given that categories in the end become restrictive and the work circumscribed and marginalized. Therefore, in spite of the frequency with which sound has been utilized within artists’ work, it remains remarkably clear of prior associations, historical precedent or weight of tradition. Sound has in fact provided an additional ingredient and strategy for the artist with the potential of addressing and informing senses other than the visual.” William Furlong, “Sound in Recent Art (1994),” reprinted in *Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelly (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 67.

<sup>xxi</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 56-57.

“[S]ome publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are makred off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to

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contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status...A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Bürger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). For a review of Habermas’ thought and the debates that ensued following the publication (and eventual translation into English) of his study of the public sphere, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and His Critics,” *New German Critique*, No. 16 (Winter 1979), 89-118; *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Thomas McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, xi.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 437.

<sup>xxv</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, 6.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>xxvii</sup> “The ideal of community refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity, and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness. The notion of a counterpublic, by contrast, refers to a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with, and responding to, bourgeois and industrial-capitalist publicity. It offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation.” Miriam Hansen, “Foreword,” in *Public Sphere and Experience*, xvii.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi-xl.

<sup>xxix</sup> Dan Graham, “Homes for America,” published in modified form in *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (December-January 1966-67), 21-22; Robert Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” *Artforum* (September 1969); Lee Lozano’s purchasing of advertising in arts magazines

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and the role of publicity in conceptual art is discussed by Alexander Alberro in *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>xxx</sup> Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, 73.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Graham Bartlett, "Interview with William Furlong."

<sup>xxxii</sup> My reading of Siegelau is indebted to Alexander Alberro's study of the curator's range of promotional activities in *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> William Furlong, interview in "Art Galleries & Alternative Spaces," *Studio International*, Vol. 195, No. 990 (January 1980), 35.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>xxxv</sup> "Conceptual practices went beyond such mapping of the linguistic model onto the perceptual model, outdistancing as they did the spatialization of language and the temporalization of visual structure. Because the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition), it thus constituted the most consequential assault on the status of that object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution." Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter 1990), 107.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> William Furlong, interview on Ulster Radio, February 4, 1980, Audio Arts Archive, Tate Britain, Box 4, TGA 200414/2/201.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> In August 1972, "The New Art" opened at the Hayward Gallery. While the show marked the official recognition of conceptual art in London, it was nevertheless poorly attended. Artists who were dissatisfied with the institutional procedures that resulted in "The New Art," including Conrad Atkinson, Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Stuart Brisley, and Gustav Metzger, recruited 120 members to the newly formed Artists' Union in front of the Hayward Gallery while the exhibition was open. John A. Walker, *Left Shift*, 84. Similarly, the Artist Placement Group's "Inno70" show at the Hayward Gallery, which ran from December 2-December 23, 1971, was the worst attended exhibition in the Hayward Gallery's history. Claire Bishop, "Incidental People: APG and Community Arts," in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 165.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Mel Ramsden, "On Practice," *The Fox*, No. 1 (1975), 83.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Blake Stimson, "The Promise of Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xxxviii-lix.

<sup>xl</sup> Elissa Barnard, "Heard any good magazines lately?," *The Chronicle-Herald*, August 4, 1984.

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<sup>xli</sup> Free International University Symposium at University College, London, December 1, 1976. William Furlong, "Information Distribution on Audio Cassette," Audio Arts Archive, Tate Britain, London, Box 6, TGA 200414/2/137.

<sup>xlii</sup> As sound historian Jonathan Sterne points out in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, even though the capacity for decentralization and lateral exchange may have been possible upon the introduction of the MPEG audio file, the major entertainment companies expected the production and distribution of content to follow the existing model on which the media economy had been grounded up to that point. The cassette—despite the claims made by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) that "home taping is killing music"—did not alter the fundamental structure of the business of selling music. See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 136-142.

<sup>xliii</sup> David Morton. *Sound Recording: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Daniel, Eric D., C. Denis Mee and Mark H. Clark. "Product Diversification," in *Magnetic Recording: The First 100 Years* (New York: IEEE Press, 1999), 92-108.

<sup>xliv</sup> Hua Hsu, "Thanks for the Memorex," *Artforum* (February 2011).

<sup>xl</sup> "Information Distribution on Audiocassette," presentation at the Free International University Symposium.

<sup>xlvi</sup> In the introduction to his study of the audio cassette's impact on the music and film music industry in North India, ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel outlines 'repressive' and 'emancipatory' uses of media: "Repressive Use of Media: Centrally controlled program; one transmitter, many receivers; passive consumer behavior; production by specialists; Control by property owners or bureaucracy / Emancipatory Use of Media: Decentralized program; Each receiver a potential transmitter; Interaction of those involved, feedback; Collective production; Social control by self-organization." See Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1-20.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," reprinted in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 259-277.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. and trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Continuum, 1974).

<sup>xlix</sup> Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 264.

<sup>l</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor A. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007).

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<sup>li</sup> Theodor A. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kantor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); David Roberts, *Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory after Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006).

<sup>lii</sup> Joel Burges, "Adorno's Mimeograph: The Uses of Obsolescence in *Minima Moralia*," *New German Critique*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 2013), 65-92.

<sup>liii</sup> Hansen, "Foreword," xxii.

<sup>liv</sup> Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>lv</sup> Enzensberger, "Constituents," 267.

<sup>lvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>lvii</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964); Bertolt Brecht, "Radio as a Means of Communication, A Talk on the Function of Radio," trans. Stuart Hood, *Screen*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4 (Winter 1979/1980), 24-28.

<sup>lviii</sup> Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," 52.

<sup>lix</sup> Enzensberger, "Constituents," 262.

<sup>lx</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>lxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>lxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>lxiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxiv</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1981), reprinted in *The New Media Reader*, 285.

<sup>lxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

<sup>lxvii</sup> Baudrillard, "Requiem," 280.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Resurrecting McLuhan? Jean Baudrillard and the Academy of Postmodernism," in *Communication for and against Democracy*, ed. Marc Raboy and Peter A. Bruck (New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 131-146.

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<sup>lxi</sup> Enzensberger, “Constituents,” 273.

<sup>lxx</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 180.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Furlong, “Information Distribution on Audiocassette.”

<sup>lxxii</sup> As Conrad Atkinson states, “There is no medium which is intrinsically more democratic than any other, and there were a lot of mistaken ideas in the 70s about the dematerialization of art, about whether it was more democratic to make films or do performances or take photographs than to paint. Similarly, it’s wrong to assume that because one painting hangs on the inside of a wall and another is presented externally as a mural, that one is more democratic, more progressive, or more socialist than the other.” Conrad Atkinson, *Picturing the System*, ed. Caroline Tisdall and Sandy Nairne (London: Pluto Press, 1981). Similarly, Mary Kelly notes the privileging of new media in politicized art practices when she recounts her involvement with the Berwick Street Collective: “In the Berwick Street Film Collective, everyone participated in schooling, editing, and so on. Consequently, it was very time consuming, but it was productive in terms of debate within the group and also in terms of our relationship to the campaign. It was the result of a certain historical imperative for political art, I mean, the tendency to look at the so-called new media as though they were somehow inherently more progressive; that is to say, film and photography were more suited to representing social issues than something like painting or sculpture, But I think I have a very different perspective on that now.” “Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey in Conversation,” in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 68.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>lxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 127.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 19.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxxix</sup> Williams, *Television*, 128.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

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<sup>lxxx</sup> William Furlong, "Sound in Recent Art," reprinted in *Audio Arts: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Art* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 128-132.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Lucy Lippard, "The Artist's Book Goes Public," *Art in America* (Jan-Feb 1977), reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 48-52.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: The History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 25.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Lev Manovich, "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009), 322.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Newman, *Video Revolutions*, p. x.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> Williams, *Television*, 130.

<sup>xc</sup> Allen, *Artists' Magazines*, 122.

## *II. Stephen Willats*

In 1975, British artist Stephen Willats visited Skeffington Court, a tower block in West London that served as the basis for *Vertical Living* (Fig. 3), a three-week long participatory work that focused on the various issues the residents faced there and possible solutions to them. From his first visit to Skeffington Court in 1975 to the on-site exhibition of *Vertical Living* three years later, Willats noticed significant changes to the physical structures themselves as well as a shift in people's attitudes towards the buildings in which they lived. Willats was interested in the architectural form of the tower block, the bureaucratic and commercial mechanisms that produced it, and the social relationships that these structures engendered. As an outsider, Willats first learned about Skeffington Court by spending time with the buildings' supervisor, who initially expressed a sense of pride in overseeing the new development and enjoyed living there, not unlike many of the residents with whom Willats met while he was doing preliminary research for *Vertical Living*. At first, Skeffington Court showed many of the outward signs of a caring and devoted community of neighbors: immaculate hallways, welcome mats before each apartment door, flower pots on the landings of the staircases, and even long carpets thrown over polished floors by the residents themselves to add warmth to communal spaces throughout the building.<sup>i</sup>

However, over the course of an eighteenth-month period the atmosphere at Skeffington Court changed dramatically. The same residents who had expressed that they were proud to live there now told Willats that they were trying to figure out how to break their leases and leave the buildings as soon as they could. As Willats describes in a text from 1982, "the lifts always seemed to be in trouble, rubbish started to be noticeably present, the floors became dirty, graffiti



began to appear in the stairwells and in the corners of landings, residents became nervous of the public parts of the environment, and in some cases even frightened.”<sup>ii</sup> The swift trajectory of decline that Willats witnessed at Skeffington Court, which indicated a broader shift in modern public housing from evident progress to a symptom of reckless development that spawned social anomie, was a common course for many of the tower blocks that were built in rapid succession in Great Britain during the postwar period generally and at an exceptionally frenetic pace during the 1960s.

For the initial stages of *Vertical Living*, Willats found seven residents who agreed to be interviewed and photographed in their apartments after he informed them that he was an artist and outlined the parameters of the project. As he had surmised from his earlier works that involved the participation of other people, Willats found that they were much more willing to engage with him or one of his “project operators” if it was clear from the outset that they were not selling a product, campaigning for political office, or proselytizing door-to-door. Working with Willats and his team, each of the seven residents surveyed photographs and listened to tape-recorded interviews to determine which images and texts would be included in “Problem Displays” that were to be placed throughout their building over the duration of *Vertical Living*. Largely eschewing control of the outcome of his project, Willats collaborated with the residents of Skeffington Court, providing a general conceptual framework and material format for them but leaving it up to the residents to generate the thematic content of the “Problem Displays.”

The visual form and terminology of the “Problem Displays” emphasize Willats’ interest in the diverse fields of advertising, cognitive science, cybernetics, and behaviorist psychology, areas of research to which he makes frequent reference in his writings and projects to describe and theorize his work. In London during the 1960s, Willats situated his work as an artist within

an interdisciplinary milieu characterized by collaborations between artists and scientists or engineers working in advanced technical fields. These collaborations were motivated by a broader constructivist impulse in British art of the period to produce works that were grounded in scientific research and objective processes rather than subjective choices made by the artist. Moreover, British artists who revived the ethos of constructivism sought to engage with advanced technical fields so their work could be understood in both aesthetic and utilitarian terms.<sup>iii</sup> Willats felt dissatisfied with the isolation of art in museums and galleries and the insular debates characterizing its production and interpretation; he wanted his work as an artist to have a broader social impact that would be legible to audiences and publics who were perhaps not acquainted with the history of modern art. Exchanges between scientists, engineers and artists during this period were facilitated by changes in the British educational system that produced curricular innovations in arts education as well. Many art schools were absorbed by larger multi-disciplinary centers called Polytechnics, which meant that artists could access expensive equipment generally reserved for science and engineering disciplines as well as the technical expertise of students and teachers in these fields. As Catherine Mason writes in *A Computer in the Art Room*, a study of the relationship between art and advanced technology in post-war Britain, “[At] the Polytechnic, it was theoretically possible to study art and craft (technology) again, as in the first public art school opened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>iv</sup> Willats was a student in Roy Ascott’s Groundcourse at the Ealing College of Art from 1962 to 1964 (which was modeled in part after Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore’s Basic Design Course at the University of Newcastle-on-Tyne), where he immersed himself in an interdisciplinary milieu in an attempt to locate his art in contexts beyond the commercial gallery and museum.

The “Problem Displays” Willats uses in *Vertical Living* address the various issues the residents of Skeffington Court deal with on a daily basis. A Problem Display titled “Looking at the effect on me of life in a confined space” contains two large photographs of a woman at home: the photograph on the left shows her having a cup of tea while listening to a portable radio and the photograph on the right shows her reading a newspaper while jotting down notes. Beneath each photograph is a question: “What do you think people like me can do to stop the feeling of isolation from others around them while being on their own?” and “How can I reduce the amount of external noise that is disturbing my thoughts in here?” The Problem Display also contains photographs of various objects from her apartment and the grounds of the building—a television set, train tracks, a parked automobile, a bed—along with key terms (“Code,” “Identity,” “Behavior,” “Motivation”) that relate the photographs to the questions and portraits. With every Problem Display Willats tries to create a legible and comprehensive portrait that clearly communicates each resident’s issue, not only in order to describe it but to also open up reflections in others as to what can be done. His primary aim in creating them is to assemble a resonant series of images in a meaningful format that will, in his own terminology, “trigger” responses from viewers.<sup>v</sup>

After producing the Problem Displays, Willats and his group of project operators went door-to-door throughout the buildings of Skeffington Court to request the participation of residents there: each participant would respond to the Problem Displays located throughout his or her building in the form of writing in a “Project File” and eventually discussing potential solutions to the problem presented in meetings arranged during the course of the work. Willats remarks that several of the residents questioned the status of *Vertical Living* as art but still wanted to take part in it. At the header of each Problem Display is a question. A Problem Display

depicting an elderly woman in her apartment asks “What do you think I should do to involve others within this tower in my daily life?” Each resident recorded responses to a series of questions in his or her Project File which was then collected by Willats and his project operators, which were subsequently exhibited together on “Register Boards” placed throughout the building. Both Problem Displays and Register Boards were exhibited on each floor of Skeffington Court over a three-week period, offering a forum for residents to engage with each other, collectively reflect on the conditions in which they lived, and devise temporary solutions to the problems there. At the conclusion of *Vertical Living*, Willats coordinated a meeting with the project operators and residents to discuss the outcome of the project. With *Vertical Living*, Willats draws on ethnographic and documentary modes of representing a specific social problem in order to activate the individuals taking part in his project to conceive of alternatives to their current condition. *Vertical Living* hinges on the agency of and material provided by the participants, who are all given equal status irrespective of their ideological viewpoints and intellectual capacities. As art critic Brigitte Franzen writes, “his approach is based on the fundamental idea of taking the residents of these fascinating, ant hill-like, mega-structures seriously as complex individuals with very different views and proposals for resolving their momentary situation.”<sup>vi</sup>

In 1978, the tower block had become a potent symbol representing the failures of modernist planning in providing adequate public housing. Following WWII, Great Britain experienced a massive redevelopment project that rehoused over three million people on council estates in inner and core city areas throughout the country. Planners, politicians and architects believed that tower blocks would solve the problems of population density and rising infrastructural costs in urban areas. Moreover, tower blocks could accommodate a large number

of people on a single plot of land and concrete construction was cheap. The tight rooms and unsanitary conditions of older city buildings would be replaced with spacious, light-filled apartments with dramatic views, which led many to welcome the tower block as a symbol of progress in the post-war period. Local politicians rode into office on promises to develop more tower blocks, which impressed voters who were convinced that the authorities in Great Britain had devised a technocratic solution to one of its most intransigent social issues. Architects and urban planners joined politicians in celebrating the proliferation of tower blocks, citing the influence of modernist architect Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* and his general promotion of high-rise architecture.<sup>vii</sup>

However, the promise of the tower block proved to be short-lived as the negative consequences of such rapid development quickly became evident. Many tower blocks were located on the outskirts of cities with little to no access to public transportation, which isolated residents from places and communities outside the council estates. The vast proliferation of housing estates in the 1960s was often executed in haste and driven by the commercial interests of construction companies, who wanted to sell materials as quickly as possible and often advised construction workers to take dangerous shortcuts that seriously impaired the structural integrity of the buildings. Indeed, in many cases design and construction flaws became apparent mere years after their completion: cracked concrete, leaking roofs, corroding steel, and dampness in apartments. The open lots surrounding the tower blocks that were intended by architects and planners to function as communal spaces fell into disrepair because no resident felt enough of a sense of ownership of those areas to maintain them; these spaces were marked by a preponderance of trash, graffiti, and drug paraphernalia, which kept almost all of the residents besides delinquent teenagers from using them. Without adequate funding provided by city and

state government, the buildings could not be maintained and supervised, which led to unsanitary conditions, vandalism and crime. Tower blocks would come to be understood as inhospitable “slums in the sky,” a failed solution to larger social problems that could not be remedied through the logic of development.<sup>viii</sup>

*Vertical Living* begins with a representational description of a particular individual’s circumstances in an isolated tower block which, through coordination and exposure, instigates a chorus of possible solutions offered by other residents who, as residents of the same set of buildings, most likely experience some of the same issues in their daily lives. In his writings, Willats describes the shift that works such as *Vertical Living* generate as a move from “descriptive” to “prescriptive”—*Vertical Living* is not simply diagnostic but eventually becomes a site of transformation in which people who are generally made to feel powerless in the face of institutional pressures and larger forces beyond their control can envision practical alternatives to their present state.<sup>ix</sup> As art historian Grant Kester writes, “One of Willats’ main goals is to acknowledge and honor a process of autonomous decision making and self-reflection among communities that are typically treated by the state and private sector as a kind of inert raw material to be variously processed and regulated, both spatially, in the architecture of state-subsidized housing, and ideologically, through the mechanisms of consumer society.”<sup>x</sup> Over the course of his visits to Skeffington Court, Willats witnessed a withering of enthusiasm in the residents living there, which he attributed to the architectural form of the tower block—which isolates residents from one another—as well as the lack of government funding to maintain the buildings once they were finished. Willats understood the tower block as the physical manifestation of a type of hierarchical power-from-above: there is no communication between the architects, planners and politicians responsible for the vast proliferation of tower blocks and

the people who eventually reside in them, who are forced to live with the mistakes made by the former with very few opportunities to individually and collectively respond to their environment. With *Vertical Living* Willats initiates a countervailing tendency: a reciprocal exchange of information among residents that exposes the failures of state bureaucracy governed by private interests. In bringing together individuals who were formerly isolated from one another, Willats contends that *Vertical Living* facilitates forms of “self-organization” and “counter-consciousness” that challenge the asymmetrical power relations that generated the tower block itself: through arriving at solutions together through debate and discussion, Willats argues, the residents of the tower block produce a form of power from below.

Willats is best known today for abandoning the conventional contexts for producing and exhibiting art—the studio and commercial gallery or museum—during the 1970s in order to engage with various publics in producing dematerialized, process-based, information-heavy projects addressing the relationship between identity and social environment. By the late 1960s, Willats increasingly felt that the art world was too insular due to its enclosure by art institutions and the audiences it summoned forth. “Art had become rarefied and internalized,” Willats states in an audio interview with *Audio Arts*. “It had essentially become dependent on the institutions of art as well as the audience, who were members of the same community that artists belonged to.”<sup>xi</sup> While Willats initially attempted to leave behind the gallery and museum altogether by promoting his practice in his self-released *Control* magazine (1965-) and producing a series of site-specific projects outside of these spaces, he quickly realized he was marginalizing his work. Instead, he developed a different strategy: his works from the mid-1970s onwards that engaged with audiences outside of art institutions produced an informational circuit between the museum/gallery and other sites. In “From Objects to People: Interaction in the Art Museum,”

Willats refers to the art museum as “little more than an ‘office’ that monitored and provided access to works sited elsewhere.”<sup>xii</sup> In 1976, Willats exhibited *Contained Living*, which used the space of The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford to publicize a work that was happening off-site. As Willats describes it,

here two culturally alienated institutions were made interactively dependent upon each other through the work’s structure, the large white space of the Museum of Modern Art’s top floor gallery, and the small island of modernist sixties council housing, the Friars Wharf Estate. An important feature of this interdependency was that you could easily walk the three hundred metres between the museum and the estate; the walk and the experience of both environments constituting an important element of the work. *Contained Living* was physically located in two contexts, which both had to be visited to engage fully with the work. Effectively there were also two audiences, the residents of the Friars Wharf Estate and the visitors to the Museum. There was also an exchange between them when they visited the other context to complete their involvement. *Contained Living* thus constituted a process in time, being comprised of a structure of events over four weeks that were located within and between the two institutions.<sup>xiii</sup>

In connecting different social groups and contexts, Willats critiqued the art world’s isolation while still maintaining it as yet another node in a network of locations that corresponded to his itinerant activities as an artist. One of his major objectives as an artist was to demonstrate what he defines as the “relativism” of our perceptions, that how we view the world and ourselves is profoundly shaped by our material and social environment and informed by the views of others in our shared milieu. His projects that bring together different individuals and groups are attempts to foreground the constructed nature of identity and reveal the larger forces that shape the environment in which it is forged—by emphasizing the contingency of self and context in his works, Willats strives to create temporary zone of critical reflection that can potentially produce a recalibration of the ways in which the participants view themselves and others.



Willats operated among a reticulated network of sites and audiences to “expand the territory of art”; he also devised a working method inspired by the advanced technical fields of cybernetics, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and behavioral science. Willats often collaborated with scientists and engineers in these fields, motivated by the desire to move beyond the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture as a way of communicating with a broader audience. By immersing himself in advanced fields of scientific research and utilizing the transfer of information as a medium, Willats believed that he could produce art that would generate an immediate social impact that objects displayed in galleries could not produce. During a period when artists in Great Britain felt constrained by the increasing austerity of a High Modernist aesthetic imported from the United States, Willats regarded these advanced technical fields—along with advertising—as a way out of the dead end of formalism. Like many of the artists addressed in this dissertation, Willats felt the need to respond to his immediate environment in London through seeking out different functions, formats, venues and audiences for his activities as an artist.

In Great Britain during the 1970s, economic troubles, gender inequality, racial tensions and class divides brought the wave of optimism that characterized the immediate postwar period to an end. One of the most notable symptoms of decline was the oil crisis of 1973, which instigated a financial collapse that undermined the stability of the country. In *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade*, historian Christopher Booker describes how the 1970s were a period in which British citizens lost faith in the modern movement, with its emphasis on technological development and an inviolable belief in progress.<sup>xiv</sup> In 1963, Prime Minister Harold Wilson delivered an historic speech at a Labour Party conference in Scarborough that proclaimed Great Britain would continue to prosper under the “white heat of the technological revolution”; a mere

decade later, his techno-futurist pronouncements were completely out of step with the state of the country. The number of British citizens who could count themselves among the middle classes swelled in the decades following WWII. Since more citizens could spend their earnings on consumer goods and engage in activities outside of work during newly available leisure time, it was believed for a moment that class struggle, the perennial battle between capital and labor, had vanished as a result of postwar affluence. However, class struggle reappeared with working-class resistance to the Industrial Relations Act of 1971— which limited the autonomy of trade unions while expanding the power of government and the private sector—and the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79, with public sector union members striking in protest of their wages being capped as a means to control rampant inflation. Women were disenfranchised by the political process and systematically barred from gaining equal rights in the workplace and the domestic sphere—the Equal Pay Act of 1970, which was supposed to legally guarantee equal wages for women and men, failed to deliver on its promises as businesses devised creative loopholes to circumvent the recently passed legislation. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies produced a range of scholarship addressing the ways in which the police and state operated in tandem to target the black population as a locus of crime, which further marginalized communities that needed assistance from the very authorities that were unfairly punishing them.<sup>xv</sup> Throughout the 1970s, the Scottish, Welsh and Irish waged independence campaigns, and the colonial occupation of Northern Ireland became an increasingly controversial issue due to persistent bombings by the IRA and confrontations between British paratroopers and Irish guerrilla fighters. Compared to the “swinging sixties,” the crises of the 1970s caused a great wave of uncertainty and insecurity that contributed to Great Britain’s identity crisis as it struggled to remain unified.<sup>xvi</sup>

For many artists in Great Britain in the 1970s, the dominance of American art criticism, embodied in the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried (and the form of “post-painterly” abstraction they championed) was a constraint that had to be thrown off in order to deal with the immediate social and political realities that impacted their everyday lives. Greenberg’s insistence on medium-specificity as the sole strategy by which the avant-garde could circumvent the homogenizing effects of mass culture appeared elitist and quietist.<sup>xvii</sup> Fried’s criticism, which lambasted Minimalism for incorporating the phenomenological experience of the viewer into the work, making of art a too “literal” or everyday experience, was understood as an extension of Greenberg’s formalism dressed up in a different guise.<sup>xviii</sup> The desire of both Greenberg and Fried to demarcate an autonomous sphere of aesthetic contemplation uncontaminated by social and political issues did not convince British artists and critics who were witnessing the impact society’s transformations were having on art and its institutions.<sup>xix</sup> The Hornsey College of Art occupation of 1968, which began as a proposal to revise the program’s curriculum that would accommodate the input of students and resulted in a far-reaching critique of the British educational system, was echoed throughout the country in various art departments, including Birmingham, Croydon and Guildford (Willats was teaching at Hornsey during the occupation).<sup>xx</sup> Museums and galleries suffered in economically hard times, with exhibitions cancelled due to lapses in funding and budget cuts affecting the operation of public institutions and art schools. Discontent with existing arts organizations led to a proliferation of alternative spaces that aimed to rectify the exclusions of major institutions and the isolation of art in museums and galleries. Due to the social pressures closing in on art during this period, aesthetics and politics could not conceivably be kept apart, and the relationship between them became a recurring topic of heated debate among artists, administrators, and government officials.

Artists on the left in Great Britain—a group to which Willats belonged—wanted to expand the range of material forms that could be deployed as art (by using video, performance, sound, etc.), create more transparent and equitable relationships between artists and art institutions, challenge art’s commodity status, and change the ways in which art interfaced with contexts and publics outside of the white cube of the gallery space or museum. In light of the proliferation of tools at artists’ disposal as a result of technological advancement—video cameras, portable sound recording, etc.—many artists felt that the mediums of painting and sculpture were ineffective means of communication with the broader audiences they desired to reach. For many artists, working exclusively in the mediums of painting and sculpture meant grappling with specific traditions and remaining within particular institutional formats, which inspired them to embrace other means of communication and venues for exhibiting their work.<sup>xxi</sup> For artists Conrad Atkinson and Victor Burgin, the role of the artist involved devising strategies to disseminate counter-information opposing the mass media, which celebrated the rule of multinational corporations and advertised consumption as a social duty. During a period in which critic Peter Fuller argued that fine art was in a crisis because of its marginal status in relationship to the mass media, artists began to appropriate and recycle images from the mass media, using the combination of image and text to subvert their intended meanings.<sup>xxii</sup> Moreover, artists increasingly turned towards public contexts for their work instead of restricting their activities to galleries and museums.

Burgin’s *Possession* (Fig. 4) was posted around the streets of Newcastle in 1976—instead of bringing a mass media form into the gallery, Burgin placed his intervention in the same locations one would find advertisements as a means to short circuit the ideological functions of these spaces while also questioning the messages they conventionally display.

Compared to the abstruse debates and opaque terminology employed by conceptual artists in Great Britain—such as Art & Language, who also used the combination of text and image to explore the ideological functions of art—Burgin’s poster is compact and straightforward, striving for legibility and immediate impact. However, the apparent simplicity of his posters belie a theoretical complexity that is produced through the critical juxtaposition of only a few elements. A photograph of a white heterosexual couple embracing, which appears to be lifted from a fashion magazine, is accompanied by a question and a statistic. Above the photograph is the question “What does possession mean to you?”; because the text is in bold font and we are accustomed to reading advertisements from the top to bottom, a viewer would immediately interpret possession in relation to monogamy: “possessing” another person. The prevalence of sensual imagery and representations that conform to traditional ideas of love are ubiquitous in advertising, often serving to draw viewers in with the lure of sexuality—here, Burgin uses the same method in order to reframe possession as an economic issue. Beneath the photograph is a statistic: “7% of our population own 84% of our wealth.” Immediately, the viewer is provided with information that transforms how the image and question are read: the text and image form a diagram of the connections between advertising, desire and wealth, leading the viewer to reflect on the values and social configurations promoted by capitalism. Ultimately, Burgin uses the means of advertising to generate a message that contradicts its conventional function, producing a friction between the imaginary fantasy of consumption and the material conditions of exploitation and inequality that serve as its foundation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Along with his engagement with the advanced technical fields of cybernetics, behavioral psychology, and cognitive science, Willats became interested in advertising not so much as an instrument of capitalist domination that had to be critically deconstructed (although he was

certainly aware of the ways in which it was conventionally implemented) but rather as a powerful tool of communication that had to be reprogrammed towards different ends. As he stated in an interview, “while the art world was stuck on the idea of a picture on a wall, advertising was thinking about time-based multi-channel feed-forward programmes and in developing new consciousnesses, or at least changing attitudes. They were looking at the effects of communication on the consciousness of the individual or communities and societies, whilst the artist was still trying to manipulate a heritage of language and traditional *modus operandi*, which all seemed completely redundant—not bullshit, but just out of step with the world we were moving into.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Just as advertising strives to influence people’s behaviors, Willats wanted his projects as an artist to instigate a “behavior switch” that would lead to the “changing and restructuring of people’s attitudes and beliefs.”<sup>xxv</sup> However, while advertising promotes the artificial need of consumption as the foundation of social belonging, Willats foregrounded the ability of the participants in his projects to alter their environments in accordance with their actual needs, which could be attained through group reflection and mobilization. When Willats took out desk space at Design Communications in 1965, a graphic design studio that was linked to the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, he culled together scientific research papers on visual communications that would inform his later projects. The firm was also interested in incorporating Willats’ findings into their research center, but once he realized that his work was being utilized for a commercial client he quickly lost interest: “their client was Wall’s Pork Pies, who wanted to know how much product diversity they could get away with, basically. ‘What a con,’ I thought. So I couldn’t handle that. I thought this is not what I got into this for.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Willats’ engagement with advertising involves a reconfiguration of the visual formats and modes of address that advertising utilizes. His Problem Displays, for example, deploy the familiar

appearance and language of advertising—the combination of text and image, the presence of rhetorical ‘hooks’ (e.g., questions) that draw the viewer in—in order to critique the ways in which it conventionally functions. Willats characterizes advertising as a mechanism that is similar to the communicative structure of public housing in Great Britain described above: “This simplification of complexity in signs towards a universal, basic object reinforces an authoritatively-made distancing between people, between those who originated a sign and those who receive its message. These institutional signs are like a ‘secret language’ articulated, somewhere out of reach of those affected, by corporations, administrations, and bureaucracies that generally inhibit free expression of individual self-identity and creativity.”<sup>xxvii</sup> For Willats, public housing and advertising are devised by specialists who do not communicate with or understand the populations affected by their designs; in his social projects, Willats transforms advertising as a tool of the capitalist industry into an engaging format that can represent the lives of tower block residents, pull other individuals into a consideration of their predicament, and change the way those issues are perceived. As he states in “Artwork as Social Model,” “The artist, by centering concerns on the parameters of social behavior, extends them directly into the structural fabric of the social setting. This does not mean that in so doing the artist ends up reinforcing existing perceptions of society, in the way advertising might be considered to; instead the artist initiates changes in social consciousness.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Willats’ projects from the 1970s onwards can be related to a range of art historical categories that emerge in the wake of the collapse of High Modernism—community art, art and technology, conceptual art, process art, etc.—yet his work is not easily assimilated by any one of them, in large part because his institutional and artistic affiliations do not crystallize into a clear identity. Indeed, Willats’ activities as an artist were constantly shifting, openly experimental, and

not always coherent. During the 1960s, he made modular PVC clothing that could be worn in different configurations, interactive light sculptures inspired by William Grey Walter's study of alpha waves in *The Living Brain*, and furniture with interchangeable parts under the auspices of the company Coree Design. Willats rejected the title of the artist in 1965, preferring instead to call himself a "conceptual designer": "I stopped calling myself an artist and started to call myself a conceptual designer with the aim of entering the infrastructure of daily life, by working with furniture and clothing and things like that...I decided to take on fundamental and practical areas of expression that were normally seen as the province of the designer, and integrate my work as an artist with what people consider useful and familiar."<sup>xxxix</sup> His trajectory as an artist begins in the early 1960s with sculptures that can be situated in the art and technology nexus: his interactive behavioral sculptures were high-tech hardware works that would respond to the movements of viewers in the gallery, who would trigger lights or reconfigurations of the objects on display. By producing sculptures that were sensitive to their surroundings, Willats wanted to incorporate the audience into the very functioning of the artwork.<sup>xxx</sup> However, he still felt that his *Visual Transmitters* and *Visual Automatics* (Figs. 5+6), which were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1968, were too abstract and formal to be socially and politically useful, and he subsequently critiqued his own work in poet John Sharkey's magazine *Structure*. While he regarded these sculptures as preliminary experiments in audience involvement, he stated that all progressive art must intervene more concretely into the infrastructure of society. Willats would gradually discard the explicit material forms of advanced technology that his interactive sculptures were built with to produce his dematerialized, participatory projects that brought together different social groups and contexts to reflect on the relationships between identity and environment. Nevertheless, he still preserves the language used in advanced industrial and



technological research to describe works like *Vertical Living*, which consist of comparatively low-tech means and materials: cassette, Xerox, photography, display board, etc. Indeed, there is a tension between the smaller-scale, DIY formats that Willats embraces in his practice as models of fluid, two-way, decentralized communication and the theoretical language he invokes to describe them.<sup>xxxix</sup>

For Willats, advanced technical disciplines and their accompanying discourses are interpreted in a flexible and multivalent way. As described above, scientific and technical fields became a part of art education as a result of curricular transformations instigated by artists such as Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore but also due to the absorption of art schools by Polytechnics. While Willats had only one year of formal art training at Roy Ascott's Ealing College of Art from 1962-63, he had a range of informal contacts with scientists and engineers in other fields: he worked as what he describes as a "part-time, lowly assistant" in Gordon Pask's Systems Research lab, which pursued research in artificial intelligence that was informed by second-order cybernetics; he also collaborated with engineer Peter Whittle and computer theorist George Mallen—who was also the co-director of Systems Research—on his interactive behavioral sculptures.<sup>xxxix</sup> In Great Britain, fields like cybernetics and artificial intelligence were less connected to military research and institutional power than they were in the United States, which meant they had less of a stigma and artists were more willing to engage with them. In the United States, due to the Vietnam War and the increasing power of the military-industrial complex, many artists viewed advanced technology with an understandable degree of suspicion. Attempts to forge connections between art and advanced industry, such as Maurice Tuchman's ill-fated Art & Technology project at LACMA, were generally viewed as having failed to successfully bring together the worlds of advanced art and technology.<sup>xxxix</sup> Tuchman paired

twenty-two artists with corporations, who would work together to produce objects or environments for the exhibition—however, the program was marked by antagonisms between the corporations funding the exhibition and the participating artists, with several artists dropping out altogether. As Jack Burnham writes in “Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed,” “Critics saw it as a covenant between between two capitalist organizations (e.g., the museum and each of its corporate benefactors), in collusion with or against all the artists involved. Even Tuchman in the catalogue intimated that most of the artists in the show would not have participated in 1971, the year “A & T” finally opened, primarily because much of the art world believed by then that there was or is a nefarious connection between advanced technology and the architects of late capitalism.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> In Great Britain, the fields of cybernetics and artificial intelligence often had roving institutional affiliations and research occurred in labs that did not garner the financial support that similar centers operating in The United States received. In *The Cybernetic Brain*, a book that emphasizes the psychiatric and exploratory mode of British cybernetics, Andrew Pickering is “struck by the profound amateurism of British cybernetics. Key contributions [by Stafford Beer and Gordon Pask] often had an almost hobbyist character.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Pickering continues: “Sociologically...cybernetics wandered around as it evolved...[and] an undisciplined wandering of its subject matter was a corollary of that...Cybernetics was thus a strange field sociologically as well as substantively. We might think of cyberneticians as nomads, and of cybernetics as a nomad science, perpetually wandering and never finding a stable home.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> While Willats was critical of the militaristic origins of cybernetics, in Great Britain it was an exciting interdisciplinary field that brought together research from different areas of inquiry that offered models for how art could function in society. Moreover, a figure like Gordon Pask—who delivered lectures at art schools, performed scientific research in his Systems

Research lab, and contributed a sculpture to Jasia Reichardt's *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA in 1968—showed Willats that artists, not unlike cyberneticians, could operate in several fields simultaneously. To understand how cybernetics came to occupy such an important position in Willats' artistic practice, it is necessary to chart his trajectory as an artist in London during the 1960s.

Willats was born in London in 1943—from 1958 to 1961 he worked as a gallery assistant at the Drian Gallery in London, which was run by Polish émigré Halina Nalecz. The Drian Gallery featured the work of British constructivists Anthony Hill, Victor Pasmore, Kenneth and Mary Martin, Gillian Wise, and John Ernest as well as international artists associated with op and kinetic art. These artists revived Russian constructivism and prewar abstract art, utilizing mathematical systems in their work while foregrounding the relationship of the viewer to the art object. Echoing the corner reliefs of Vladimir Tatlin, Victor Pasmore began to work in relief when he realized that painting was limited by its two-dimensionality. In *Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink* (1963) (Fig. 8), Pasmore created a relief sculpture in Perspex and wood that was somewhere between painting and sculpture and intended to be viewed from all sides. Twenty-three painted wooden blocks of varying size and shape are arranged in an asymmetrical composition that pierces a sheet of Perspex that serves as its support. For Pasmore, painting could only suggest three-dimensionality through illusion, and his relief sculptures were attempts to incorporate the surrounding space into the work while also activating the viewer. As Pasmore states, “whereas in representational art the spectator is confined to a point which is always at a distance from the object, in abstract form he must handle, feel, move around and get into the work if he is to fully apprehend the intentions of the artist.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> For the artists who were exhibited at the Drian Gallery, sensory and physical

participation were constitutive features of their paintings and sculptures, with modulations of light, movement, and space inflecting their reception as the viewer interacted with them. Willats helped to organize exhibitions of paintings by Yaacov Agam in 1959, who had shown in the landmark kinetic art exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René four years earlier along with Jésus Rafael Soto, Victor Vasarely and Carlos Cruz-Diez among others; Willats also assisted in presenting the work of Argentine artist Gyula Kosice in 1960, who founded the Arte Madi movement, which promoted Bauhaus ideas in Latin America. The colorful, ribbed, illusionistic surfaces of Agam's paintings produce subtle compositional shifts as the viewer changes her position in the gallery, while Kosice's spatial constructions and hydraulic sculptures called for the viewer to manipulate their parts into new arrangements, not unlike the work of El Lissitzky. The artists Willats encountered at the Drian Gallery led him to reconsider the relationship between artist, object and audience: instead of privileging the creative activity of the artist in producing a completed object, Willats recognized that the artist could generate more open forms that required the input of an audience. In a notebook entry from 1959, he hints at a more collaborative model of artistic production by coining the term "mutualism," which describes a situation in which "the audience determines something for themselves using their own experience, and the artist is the provider of tools that might enable this."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

While the audience had become an object of theoretical concern for Willats during his time at the Drian Gallery, he had yet to devise a means to produce the "mutualism" that was suggested by the constructivist works on display there. While the potential for audience participation may have been implied by the very structure of the works themselves, Willats was still struck by the restricted public that actually engaged with them. Reflecting on his time working at the Drian Gallery, Willats comments that "there were very few visitors [there], and I

had plenty of time to sit by the door thinking. I began to make notebooks and question about why people went or didn't go to galleries.<sup>»xxxix</sup> Much of Willats' development as an artist in the 1960s and 1970s is driven by the question of why art does not have a broader social impact and remains restricted to particular institutions and exhibition formats. During this period, he also worked weekends at the New Vision Centre, which was set up by artist, critic and teacher Denis Bowen along with Nalecz and showed work by Piero Manzoni and the Zero Group. While his contacts with the Drian Gallery and New Vision Centre would put him in touch with several figures who would profoundly influence his artistic career, Willats was nevertheless dissatisfied operating within the lineage of European avant-garde art.

In 1962, Denis Bowen suggested to Willats that he attend Roy Ascott's Groundcourse at the Ealing College of Art, where Bowen was teaching part-time. Ascott's Groundcourse drew together art, science and technology in an innovative, interdisciplinary curriculum that privileged theory over dexterity in materials. At a time when most art education would begin with materials, Ascott urged his students to explore different disciplines in order to discover new methodologies and approaches for artists, and he often brought specialists and intellectuals from a variety of fields to lecture. Ascott also emphasized collaboration between teachers and students in the Groundcourse, creating a horizontal mode of pedagogy that Willats would replicate in his own teaching. Ascott's pedagogical methods were inspired by cybernetic principles, and he identified himself as "the artist responsible for first introducing cybernetic theory into art education [in Britain] and for having disseminated the concept of a cybernetic vision in art through various art and scientific journals."<sup>xl</sup> Ascott discovered cybernetics in F.H. George's *Automation, Cybernetics and Society* (1959), Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1948), and W. Ross Ashby's *Design for a Brain* (1952) just

months before becoming Head of Foundation Studies at Ealing College of Art. He developed a curriculum that incorporated the cybernetic principles of feedback and contingency, creating a pedagogical environment that was responsive to students and often involved group projects that would shift over the course of their development. Ascott stressed that artists must embrace new technologies, move away from exclusively producing objects and instead emphasize process, change the relationship between artist and audience, and explore the ways in which art related to larger systems (social, institutional, technological, etc.). Not unlike Jack Burnham, Ascott rejected the notion that art was reducible to material objects alone, proposing a more holistic approach to producing and interpreting art that explored the responses of audiences and the networks in which art functioned. However, while Burnham examined conceptual art in relation to a range of technological, social and institutional systems, Ascott's approach was governed by a distinct emphasis on new media and technologies. Ascott believed that history had entered a new phase of development and art—if it was to keep up with the changes wrought by new technologies—would have to update its techniques and modes of operation. The extent to which Ascott felt there had been a rupture in historical continuity at the time is evident in his writings: “[The] recognition that art was located in an interactive system rather than residing in a material object...provides a discipline as central to an art of interactivity as anatomy and perspective had been to Renaissance vision.”<sup>xli</sup> Ascott's statement echoes contemporary pronouncements in economics and sociology: society was moving from an industrial to a post-industrial form of organization; an information revolution was changing the manner in which people lived and produced and exchanged value; the economy was no longer oriented around the production of material goods but would be based on the exchange of information.<sup>xlii</sup>

By insisting that art and its institutions should be responsive to imminent social transformations taking place as a result of technological development, Ascott promotes a strain of technological utopianism that was associated with Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. Ascott's concept of the "telematic embrace"—in which new forms of intelligence, cooperation, and sharing are made possible by communication networks that bring people together, creating an "infrastructure for spiritual interchange that could lead to the harmonization and creative development of the whole planet"—echoes Marshall McLuhan's pronouncement that new communication technologies were collapsing space and time to create a "global village."<sup>xliii</sup> This technological utopianism was part of the broader cultural milieu in London during the 1960s, one that was characterized by a distinct optimism concerning the role that technology would play in constructing a better, more connected society. As David Mellor writes in *The Sixties Art Scene in London*, "A dream of technical control and instant information conveyed at unthought-of velocities haunted Sixties culture. The wired, electronic outlines of a cybernetic society became apparent to the visual imagination—an immediate future—drastically modernized by the impact of computer science. It was a technologically utopian structure of feeling, positivistic, and 'scientific.'<sup>xliv</sup> Willats followed Ascott in his belief that artists needed to engage with advanced technical fields, yet he did not subscribe to the same technological utopianism; instead of believing that technology would serve as the basis of a better society, Willats deployed the language and terminology of cybernetics to describe how specific social configurations were exceedingly complex and open to revision.

As art historian Edward Shanken has argued, the mapping of cybernetics onto art is "an imprecise science at best," and during the 1960s and 1970s the specificity of cybernetics as a discipline became somewhat indistinct as it found its way into other areas of practice.<sup>xlv</sup> During

this period, many of the insights of cybernetics—that events are fundamentally contingent, that feedback can, if monitored, effectively regulate the functioning of a system, that humans, animals, and machines behave in similar ways, and that with knowledge of the components of a system it can be automated and controlled—were distanced from their military-academic origins and became adaptable to a wide range of disciplines in the sciences, social sciences and humanities. Geoffrey Bowker has described how cybernetic rhetoric spread across multiple fields of research to become a “universal discipline” that became nothing short of an explanation of how the world and everything within it functioned: “Cyberneticians argue that we were now at a historical conjuncture where machines were becoming sufficiently complex and the relationship between people and machines sufficiently intense that a new language was needed to span both: the language of cybernetics. They also argued that with this new language they were breaking down the false dichotomies between mind and matter, human and nonhuman—dichotomies that the new information-based language would show never to have been true.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Cybernetics became one of the dominant intellectual paradigms of the postwar period and had a crucial influence on the birth of computer science and artificial intelligence while also generating experiments in the field of art.

Cybernetics studies the behavior of communications systems and human and machine interactions. Emphasizing the exchange of information as the fundamental basis of any system’s operation—whether biological, mechanical or social—cybernetics strives to define parameters, monitor operations, and predict outcomes. Foregrounding feedback, communication and nonlinear processes as essential features of all systems, cybernetics generally aims to ensure stability and function (which is one of the reasons cybernetics became a tool of corporate management). Early cybernetics is populated by various “models” that serve to explain particular



cybernetic principles. The homeostat, a device created by William Ross Ashby in 1948, explains homeostasis and would be familiar to anyone who has been in a space with controlled temperature. For example, a thermostat operates by switching heaters or air-conditioners on and off in response to the output of a temperature sensor, and its basic mechanism is modeled after Ashby's device. Ashby created the homeostat to demonstrate how a system could be functionally determined and still adapt to a changing environment: it can adjust itself to remain in equilibrium with its environment through feedback and in this sense it is "self-organizing." Homeostasis is a concept imported from physiology to describe the ways in which a body will change according to environmental inputs, but for Ashby and more generally the discipline of cybernetics in its early stages there is no need to distinguish between devices and bodies, mechanical and biological systems. As Katherine Hayles writes in *How We Became Posthuman*, the role of such devices was to place "man and machine into equivalence."<sup>xlvii</sup> In his writings, Willats uses the concept of homeostasis in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner: it describes how individuals who share the same environment collectively decide to tailor it to their needs through communication and feedback.

Historian of science Peter Galison has argued that the origins of cybernetics can be traced to an anti-aircraft predictor designed by Norbert Wiener during World War II. Galison contends that the devices and philosophical implications of cybernetics, even if applied to different disciplines, cannot be completely dissociated from the military research contexts in which they emerged: "In general, the cultural meaning of concepts or practices...is indissolubly tied to their genealogy. To understand the specific meaning of the cybernetic device is necessarily to track them back to the wartime vision of the pilot-as-servomechanism."<sup>xlviii</sup> Wiener, the "father of cybernetics," helped in the American wartime effort by crafting electrical devices that could

determine the location of attacking plane moments in advance, creating a communicative relay between soldier, calculating machine, and artillery. For Galison, the origins of cybernetics in military research that involve a blurring of the boundary between human and machine do not simply disappear once the discipline is grafted onto other areas of practice. Indeed, in many accounts cybernetics is considered to be a science of control, a way of regulating living beings and machines through the master discourse of communication. Architectural historian Reinhold Martin draws a parallel between cybernetic machines and Gilles Deleuze's "control society," in which monitoring and systems of feedback regulate social imbalances and disorder.<sup>xlix</sup> As Deleuze writes, "controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point."<sup>l</sup> Galison argues that cybernetics made "an angel of control and a devil of disorder," and the standard historical account of cybernetics emphasizes its emergence from the military-academic complex of the MIT Rand Laboratory during the postwar period.<sup>li</sup>

In 1965, Willats began circulating *Control* (Fig. 9), a magazine that would promote his own practice as an artist while also offering space to other artists as well as scientists and engineers (contributors included Victor Burgin, Mary Kelly, Artist Placement Group, John Stezaker, Peter Dunn & Loraine Leeson). Willats did not have a solo exhibition at a museum until 1968, so the magazine was a way for him to gain exposure and explore the themes addressed in his work. *Control* was not simply an art magazine but also served as a feedback mechanism for the audiences that were engaging with it: the magazine did not have advertising or any form of support other than sales, and in issues 2 and 3 readers were invited to send in letters responding to the magazine's content. *Control* was the vehicle through which Willats instigated what he described as "interaction between what were culturally segregated areas of

information.”<sup>lii</sup> Inspired by the interdisciplinary milieu he encountered at the Ealing College of Art, Willats brought together cybernetic art, systems theory, concrete poetry, radical architecture and even the more traditional mediums of painting and sculpture in the pages of *Control*. While at the Drian Gallery and the New Vision Centre, Willats was disappointed with the reach of the art exhibited there, and *Control* can be seen as an early attempt to expand the distribution of his activities: an impressive range of galleries, publishers, museums, universities and libraries in the United States and Europe subscribed to *Control*, including the British Museum, the ICA, the Tate Gallery, Archiv Sohm, the New York Public Library, and Something Else Press. Art historian Anthony Hudek argues that *Control* is the link between Willats’ hardware behavioral artworks from the 1960s and the social projects like *Vertical Living* from the 1970s, insofar as the magazine and social projects “are material and discursive objects that scrutinize their own performance as dynamic communicational elements in society.”<sup>liii</sup> Hudek elaborates on how *Control* dovetails with the aims of social projects like *Vertical Living* from the 1970s: “Willats’ overarching plan was to reinvent the function of the individual in society, by transforming her or him from passive consumer of messages into a highly aware and responsive element of larger complex systems—the social fabric—upon which she or he could exert control.”<sup>liv</sup>

While “control” may generally have repressive connotations, referring to an exercise of hierarchical power from above, Willats clearly understands it as a form of agency or power from below, describing the way individuals take control of their lives and environments. In the early 1980s, Willats becomes interested in the spaces of relative autonomy that people on the margins of society create in order to subvert the prescribed routines and behaviors imposed on them by the dominant culture. In works like *Inside the Night* (1982), which explores the informal collectives formed in private nightclubs throughout London, and *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers*

*Camp*, which documents the use teenage youth make of an empty lot at The Avondale Estate at Hayes in West London, Willats identifies a “counter-consciousness” based on “self-organization” and community that opposes the determinations of corporate and state power. The people attending nightclubs like the Cha Cha Club abandon their everyday selves and fashion identities that express their alienation from normality; the teenagers living on the Avondale Estate at Hayes are isolated from one another physically and psychologically due to the architectural form of the tower block, so they escape to the open fields surrounding the estates to sniff glue and wreak havoc, which produces its own kind of provisional solidarity. Cybernetics—with its principles of feedback and self-organization—is creatively interpreted by Willats to describe social groupings rooted in agency and contingency: cybernetics sheds its militaristic origins and becomes a type of power theory, with the marginal reclaiming space of their own while expressing their subordinate position in society. The terms Willats imports from cybernetics to describe his collaborative projects with tower block residents and youth subcultures, far from gesturing towards scientific means of ensuring a “homeostatic” social order, serve as metaphors for fluid modes of self-determination based on reciprocal feedback and evolving consciousness. Willats’s adoption of cybernetic terms to describe his social projects from the 1970s and 1980s is not simply a creative misreading, however—it is also informed by the institutional standing and theoretical stakes of cybernetics in Great Britain.

In *The Cybernetic Brain*, Pickering contends that while the military and industrial applications of cybernetics are significant aspects of its history, by themselves they do not constitute a totalizing portrait of the discipline. “In our world,” Pickering writes, “any form of knowledge and practice that looks remotely useful is liable to be taken up by the military and capital for their own ends, but by the end of this book it should be abundantly clear that military

and industrial applications come nowhere close to exhausting the range of cybernetics.”<sup>lv</sup>

Pickering explores second-order British cybernetics as a different tendency altogether, focusing on the work of Gregory Bateson, R.D. Laing, and Gordon Pask and showing the ways in which their research informed the psychedelic counterculture and radical critiques of psychiatry in the 1960s. Moreover, second-order cybernetics “seeks to recognize that the scientific observer is part of the system to be studied, and this in turn leads to a recognition that the observer is situated and sees the world from a certain perspective, rather than achieving a detached and omniscient ‘view from nowhere.’” Instead of a science that aimed to dominate nature and living beings in an objective and deterministic framework, Pickering argues that second-order British cyberneticians were “in the business of *anticontrol*,” insofar as their research presented a view of the world that was complex and evolutionary, not causal, calculable, or determinable.<sup>lvi</sup> Compared to the military applications of cybernetics in the United States, British cybernetics had a playful, imaginative bent that inspired diverse fields including the arts and music. In 1968, Jasia Reichardt curated *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA, which featured contributions from artists, musicians, engineers, and Gordon Pask, who had a great influence on the course of Willats’ career after he lectured at the Ealing College of Art in 1963. At his Systems Research laboratory, Pask developed complex machines that responded to the input of users to generate light and sound effects, architecture that could be reconfigured according to the desires of its inhabitants, and at *Cybernetic Serendipity* he displayed his *Colloquy of Mobiles* (Fig. 7), an assemblage of robots that interacted with each other in unanticipated and stochastic ways.<sup>lvii</sup> The research and experiments of British cybernetics hinged on what Pickering describes as a “performative” ontology of the mind and world that viewed the behaviors of living and nonliving things as always in a state of becoming—shifting, changing, adapting, responding—rather than abstracted

from reality to be analyzed in isolation. British cybernetics viewed the world and everything within it as exceedingly complex and not entirely subject to human determination, offering a distinctly non-instrumental perspective on the relationship between behavior and the environment and demonstrating “concretely and very variously the possibility of a nonmodern stance in the world, a stance of revealing rather than enframing that hangs together with an ontology of unknowability and becoming.”<sup>lviii</sup>

In his social projects of the 1970s and 1980s, Willats applied this fluid understanding of self and context to examine how both people and environments are in a state of constant flux. Moreover, the exploratory mode of cybernetics Willats was exposed to in Ascott’s Groundcourse and Pask’s Systems Research—a cybernetics that emphasized a more humane society, not a more functional one—also gave his work in the 1970s and 1980s its distinctly political character, which attempted to change the communicative structure of particular situations and demonstrate that, with unanticipated forms of organization and interaction, people could exercise more control over their circumstances. As art historian Sharon Irish writes, “Willats believes that the more we control our physical, social, and technical interactions through observation and reflection the more we can reflect reality to meet our needs. Further, through networks of interactions and exchanges, he posits that we can transform our current reality, imagining different ways of performing everyday routines and group processes.”<sup>lix</sup> In the first projects that moved beyond the space of the gallery, *Man from the Twenty First Century* (1971), *Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs* (1971-72), *West London Social Resource Project* (1972-73), *Oxford Insight Development Project* (1972) and *Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project* (1973), Willats circulated questionnaires among various social groups that asked individuals to disclose their impressions of and attitudes towards the environments in which they lived or spent

time, which were then collected and exhibited in the form of “Register Boards” on site. What these projects share in common is an attempt to connect—through the exchange of information—communities that would normally have little to no contact with one another in order to chart the “relativism” and contextual nature of our perceptions. For Willats, behaviors and perceptions are dynamic responses to what people ascertain within their social milieu, whether in the form of the physical spaces in which they live, the places they work, the objects they possess, the media they consume, or the interpersonal relations they share with others. Through connecting areas distinguished in terms of social class, architecture, and amenities, Willats’ projects de-naturalizes these behaviors and perceptions through a comparative analysis that unfolds in real-time. As Willats writes, “this does not imply that the work is just descriptive of reality, but...[forms] the basis for a re-modelling of that same reality. The artist’s intervention is to change what is perceived as normal by the audience, not reflecting to them what is already normal, but using normality to provide an access into what initially are likely to be difficult concepts to internalize.”<sup>lx</sup>

In emphasizing that the relationship between environmental conditions, patterns of behavior, and our understanding of them is not static but a constant site of negotiation, Willats strove to demonstrate that they could potentially be altered if there was deemed to be a gap between initially described and potentially desired states. His earliest social project, *Man from the Twenty-First Century*, organized within the Fine Arts department at Trent Polytechnic, focused on working-class and middle class groups in two different areas of Nottingham; this work shows how Willats aimed to “show two groups of people that are socially, economically and physically separated that they both share the same predicament, which is that they are not in full control of their social environment.”<sup>lxi</sup> Through producing a communicative forum in which

this insight could be articulated, Willats wanted to trigger a “behavior switch” among the participants in *Man from the Twenty-First Century* that would lead to a restructuring of people’s attitudes towards their environment, their own lives and also towards others.

In *Man from the Twenty-First Century*, Willats devised a range of strategies to encourage the involvement of audiences who did not belong to the gallery-attending public, with some bordering on the ridiculous. Willats placed advertisements in local newspapers and purchased radio spots; he put up posters around the areas in which he planned the work to pique interest in the project, with headlines reading “Man from the Twenty-First Century is Coming Your Way” and “Who is the Man from the Twenty-First Century?”; he constructed a mobile silver rocket ship, which traveled from door-to-door with a man dressed in a spacesuit emerging from it to proclaim “I am the Man from the Twenty-First Century and I have come down from Earth in 1971 to ascertain your social problems”; participants were even given complimentary “Man from the Twenty-First Century” sunglasses. The techniques Willats deployed to persuade people to participate in *Man from the Twenty-First Century* are derived from the commercial realms of marketing and advertising, yet for Willats these strategies—which are generally used to promote consumption—can be recalibrated towards different ends and are not flawed as vehicles with which to communicate meaning. In “Cognition and Advertising,” an unpublished text from 1972, Willats remarks on the necessity of using these strategies to involve people in his social projects: “What we considered important about this approach was its ability to give us a way into the social groups’ social structures...rather than taking members of a group out of their social context to glean the information we wanted. The first attempt at distributing the questionnaire [for *Man from the Twenty-First Century*] failed because of inhibition on the part of the recipients. We had gone along to the houses as ourselves, i.e. packaged in the clothing, language



codes, etc., of the art environment.”<sup>lxii</sup> Once he adopted an approach that was more familiar to most people, the return on completed questionnaires was much higher despite the high demands of the projects, which involved simple yes or no question and developed into participants describing and drawing in detail their ideal garden. For Willats, abandoning the discourses and codes of the art context produced a more fluid mode of communication that could engage different publics, in turn creating a relay of communication that cut across geographical, class and knowledge barriers.

The use of various strategies by Willats to initiate communication between different social groups was informed by his study of Basil Bernstein, a linguist whose study of “restricted” and “elaborated” codes examined the uses of language in different contexts. As a linguist, Bernstein explored the relationship between language, environment and identity, and his analysis of the different “codes” used among various social groups was motivated by a desire to understand the relationships between class and communication. For Bernstein, a restricted code is characteristic of the use of language among a group of individuals who share the same context and knowledge base. An elaborated code does not assume the same degree of familiarity as a restricted code and tends to be more explicit and comprehensive. As Bernstein writes, “an elaborated code, where prediction is much less possible at the syntactic level, is likely to arise in a social relationship which raises the tension in its members to select from their linguistic resources a verbal arrangement which closely fits specific referents...The preparation and delivery of relatively explicit meaning is the major function of this code. The code will facilitate the verbal transmission and elaboration of the individual’s unique experience.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Bernstein found that the restricted code was more common among working class groups while the elaborated code was more characteristic of middle class groups due to their experience of greater

social mobility. While Bernstein warned against privileging elaborated over restricted codes, since the restricted code was instrumental in forming close social bonds, he did want to raise awareness of the ways in which the exclusive use of restricted codes hindered the ability of working class children to learn within the current structure of educational institutions. Willats encountered the work of Bernstein at a seminar he gave at the ICA in London: Bernstein's emphasis on the operative linguistic codes in different social groups informed Willats' social projects from the 1970s. In relating his activities as an artist to various audiences, Willats recognized that his approach had to adapt to different contexts, and he describes using restricted codes to involve various audiences in his work: "As the receivers are differentiated people, ascertaining their existing perceptions and language usage, together with their environmental context, is especially important. It would also seem that where possible the existing language should be used, so as to cut out orientations or inhibitions which might occur if learning/acquisition of a different language had to take place...if the strategy is to employ the language of recipients, its structure/content should also be conditioned by its meaningfulness to them."<sup>lxiv</sup> While Willats utilized the restricted codes of situated communities to involve them in his work, the ways in which he asked the participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and desires in detail without any assumption of familiarity on the part of the reader can be understood as a form of elaborated code, which has a greater potential to cut across different barriers. Moreover, Willats left behind the restricted code of the art context—characterized by abstruse debates and specialized language—in order to encourage participation among audiences who perhaps felt alienated by its mode of communication. With his social projects, Willats wanted to gather concrete information that could be effectively relayed between different

communities, and in order to accomplish this goal he had to first engage with audiences in a restricted code in order to facilitate communication in an elaborated code.

*Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project* (Figs. 10 + 11), which took place as part of the Leith Festival, is the most technically complex of Willats' earlier participatory works. The project focused on four distinct areas of the city distinguished in terms of social class, architecture and amenities, with fifty participants from each area (Leith, Morningside, Slateford, Silverknowes) involved. First, Willats and his team of "project operators" amassed information from residents of each area about their routines and environments by issuing "problem sheets" that contained open-ended questions or prompts. The problem sheets were then delivered to a "Central Core" consisting of artists, volunteers and a computing system. Wilats collaborated with computer programmer Stuart Pound, who developed the algorithm that was used on a mainframe computer to sift through the data provided by the participants. The "Central Core" processed the anonymous responses and identified several categories that each neighborhood shared in common but experienced differently: mealtimes, leisure, work, etc. Once these subcategories were identified, Willats and his team produced a following set of exercises for the next set of "problem sheets," which were issued to initiate the second round of information gathering.

*Edinburgh Social Construction Project* was a social modelling experiment that initially described conditions in each neighborhood and then tracked how each community responded to the accumulated information: the "problem sheets" that were handed out to each resident at the beginning of the project were summarized in "consensus tendencies" that were displayed on boards in public spaces at each location, allowing participants and their neighbors to analyze responses from their own locations and from other areas as well. The four groups of participants

were supplemented by the audience of the Leith Festival as well, who were encouraged to respond to the material gathered by Willats and his team. As Willats described it,

the project attempts to show how people, social groups, relate to each other, and how social conventions determine that relationship, which are not generally articulated consciously by members of a social group. The project would then show how people could relate to each other, or it could set up a framework whereby people could postulate their own relationships to each other. As a community model building project, it would establish a framework that enabled a community to construct a representation of themselves, which over a period of time would modify according to membership, and environmental changes. The process by which a community constructs a representation of themselves, could also show at various stages the relationship that group has to another one, and enable members from both groups to restructure relationships.<sup>lxv</sup>

With *Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project*, Willats discovered a material form that realized the cybernetic principles of feedback and continual adjustment that he encountered in Ascott's Groundcourse and Pask's Systems Research lab. Moreover, Willats states that the project operated beyond the confines of existing arts institutions, creating an intervention in society whose very medium was the social behaviors of the audience itself. As Willats writes,

For the artist, a move away from the present inverted qualities of art into an outgoing, truly socially concerned art offers potent political potential. This, coupled with the use of information drawn from modern behavioral psychology, etc. and the technology that goes with it, leaves the artist in a position to take a fresh look at audience motivation...Art would be in a position to move away from paintings on walls that cater to a small elite, and move into the open. The idea of art as known at present could well disappear altogether and be replaced by an art which is programmed in a Total Environmental sense, the audience being considered not as an afterthought but as the essential reason for the work. Thus the artist can play a truly forward-looking part in society.<sup>lxvi</sup>

With *Meta Filter* (1973-75) (*Fig. 12*), Willats created a console and interactive computer system in consultation with Derek Aulton, a professional electronics engineer. It is, however, not

the equipment itself—which wouldn’t look out of place in a NASA control room or television broadcasting station—so much as the participants and their responses that truly constitute the work. The “operators” of *Meta Filter* sign up for appointments with an administrator who oversees the program’s operation, and he or she “loads in” interpretations in response to the images presented and within the word parameters provided by an accompanying thesaurus. Two individuals sit facing each other on opposite sides of a large interactive computer console that prevents them from seeing one another. On each side a screen depicts a series of photographic images of people in a variety of settings and interactions. For each image, the “operators” are asked to determine the nature of the situation by choosing a descriptive word from the provided thesaurus, which contains approximately 1,000 words. Each selection is entered into the computer by means of a keypad and is seen by the person on the other side of the console. In order to move through the twelve “problem areas” that make up its program—most of which address different forms of interpersonal relationships—*Meta Filter* requires that the two operators eventually agree on a word that accurately describes the situation depicted in front of them. There is no right or wrong response to the images, and if there is disagreement the participants will remain stuck in a given “problem area.” Behind each operator, duplicate sheets from previous iterations of *Meta Filter* hang on the walls, which can be consulted by current participants to compare one’s own interpretations with others.

*Meta Filter* is a two-way communication information-processing system that encourages its users to reflect on how perceptions of individuals, groups, and situations are contingent, dialogic and negotiable. Willats views the “mutualism” resulting from two individuals from different backgrounds engaging with one another and arriving at a “state of agreement” as a model in miniature of a different society, one based not on compliance and acquiescence but

reciprocal and dynamic understanding. Critic Richard Cork suggests that the optimal partner for working through *Meta Filter*'s program is a complete stranger, so that any eventual consensus is earned through resolving challenges and mediating differences in perspective.<sup>lxvii</sup> *Meta Filter* was first exhibited at the alternative space Gallery House in 1975 and would subsequently travel to libraries, public museums, and even a room above a taxicab storefront. Not unlike *Edinburgh Social Construction Project*, *Meta Filter* is crucially dependent on its context and operators, and Willats wanted it to function "as its own institution...independent of specific art institutions." While the parameters are in place in advance of any interaction between operators (images, thesaurus, format, etc.), the problems themselves are intentionally crafted to be open-ended and ambiguous. Rather than a message transmitted from artist to audience, *Meta Filter* was set up by Willats to be an interactive process with different outcomes depending on its users. As Willats writes, "The avoidance of a dogmatic imposed ideological view in a person's experience of *Meta Filter* was at odds with the intellectual climate in the art world of a self-justifying dogmatism which ruled in the early seventies."<sup>lxviii</sup>

*Meta Filter* consists of an open framework that demands completion through engaging and interacting with different individuals, not unlike his social projects. Willats' art generates complex forms of collective authorship that engender variable effects, but their diverse outcomes are often unified by Willats' focus on the ways in which social pressures and environmental constraints dictate how people perceive themselves and others. Moreover, in works like *Vertical Living* and *Edinburgh Social Construction Project*, Willats creates communicative forums that not only document given social configurations but also indicate how they can be changed or improved. As Willats writes, "my practice is about representing the potential self-organizing richness of people within a reductive culture of objects and possessions. In a society which

reduces people I'm working to celebrate their richness and complexity. I see this as a cultural struggle.”<sup>lxix</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Willats begins to work with groups that do not fit into the dominant culture, who find ways to express their opposition to its values and organize themselves into social units that provide forms of solidarity and belonging that provisionally ease their sense of alienation and marginalization.

In *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp* (Figs. 13 + 14), Willats focuses on the youth demographic living in tower block housing estates. These council estates had fallen into decline rapidly due to basic infrastructural inadequacies like the use of cheap materials and rushed construction schedules that encouraged companies to take a number of dangerous shortcuts. For Willats, the architectural form of the tower block also prevented residents from interacting with one another—it served as a potent symbol of the breakdown of community and the intensification of alienation in contemporary life. Willats arrived back in West London at the end of 1980 after having spent the previous year in West Berlin on a DAAD scholarship. Having worked with residents of the Avondale Estate at Hayes in West London on previous projects, he returned to the estate to find that many of the apartments there were “simply uninhabitable.” Willats had primarily engaged with adult residents of council estates in works like *Vertical Living*; with *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp*, Willats turned towards the teenagers at the Avondale Estate, who had never known any other way of life and managed to deal with their surroundings through forms of temporary escape. Willats met Mrs. Briggs, the leader of the tenants’ association at the Avondale Estate, who introduced him to elderly tenants who were trying to improve the living conditions there. Through Mrs. Briggs, Willats was introduced to Mrs. Purdy, whose daughter Pat became the focus of the project. Through a series of conversations and taped discussions with Pat, Willats recognized how the teenagers used a

wasteland adjacent to the estate (which was called “The Lurky Place” by the teenagers) to escape the oppressive architectural containers in which they lived. The collages Willats produced in consultation with Pat contain portraits of her and photographs of the estate, quotations from her discussions with Willats, questions that address the issues the teenagers face at the estate, and a series of drawn lines that connect the various panels depicting areas and objects there. In *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp*, Willats sets up a contrast between the isolation imposed on the teenagers by their surroundings and the relative freedom of the wasteland, which serves as an autonomous space where they could temporarily throw off the restrictions of their everyday lives. Refusing to characterize the activities taking place at the wasteland as juvenile delinquency, Willats gives Pat space to explain that “The Lurky Place” allowed the teenagers living at the estate to release tension, establish a sense of self through expressing values and behaviors not prescribed to them, and in turn form a provisional sense of community that was denied them by their physical environment. As Pat describes her apartment in one of the panels of the work, “the only views I’ve got from all the windows in the flat is of another block that’s exactly the same as the one I’m living in, and you see someone else looking out the window and it’s like looking in a mirror. The amount of people I’ve brought home and they’ve said: ‘Oh blimey.’ They’ve walked through the corridors and said: ‘Oh Blimey, it’s just like being in prison here, fancy living here.’” While many would consider Purdy and her friends at the estate to be mere statistical victims of architectural and infrastructural oversight, Willats offers them spaces of representation where they can show how they attempted to make the conditions in which they found themselves bearable.<sup>lxx</sup>

Willats’ interest in the “glue sniffers” of the Avondale Estate has a parallel in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ analysis of youth subcultures. The



University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in 1964, with Richard Hoggart serving at its first director and participants including Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Phil Cohen. The CCCS interpreted British postwar working-class youth subcultures—teddies, mods, punks—as complex social formations that devised imaginary solutions (through dress, music, lifestyle, leisure) to the problems rooted in their class positions and experience. While postwar affluence in Great Britain contributed to a better standard of living, with increases in education and greater spending on consumer goods, the relative positions of classes in British society remained largely the same. As the CCCS writes in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, “the idea that the ‘opportunity structures’ of society had been thrown open and a new fluid social structure had arisen was shown to be an empty promise.”<sup>lxxi</sup> The CCCS insisted that class as an analytical category did not simply fade into obsolescence during the 1970s but rather took on more complex forms. Postwar redevelopment and urban planning had caused the breakup of traditional working-class communities, and one of the aims of the CCCS was to demonstrate that organized revolutionary consciousness was only one among many possible relations between class and politics.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the CCCS described how youth subcultures ‘win space’ for the young in registering a symbolic territory defined by social rituals that identify them as a group and not just a random assortment of individuals. The damaging effects of unemployment, lack of education, and low-paid, routinized labor among working-class youths were not solved so much as counteracted with “subcultural strategies,” in which leisure and recreation offer forms of temporary escape and group solidarity from the harsh economic realities of contemporary life as well as the homogenizing effects of mass culture. The CCCS's

approach to culture emphasizes reception as an act of production itself: the refashioning of the materials of consumer culture (among the punks, for example) can function to subvert the priorities and values of the dominant culture. Culture, then, is not understood as unidirectional or top-down but as a field of articulation and disarticulation, with unanticipated consequences resulting from how individuals make creative use of mass culture.

The most well-known study to emerge from the Birmingham School was Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), in which youth subcultures of the postwar period are characterized by their opposition to the banality and homogeneity of mass culture. Hebdige describes the ways in which punks reconfigured conventional symbols and materials (the Union Jack flag, the Queen's face, safety pins) towards politically subversive and self-expressive ends as "semiotic guerrilla warfare." A self-conscious refusal of mainstream society, subcultures are ways in which individuals who do not belong to the dominant culture can express their distance from it as a form of empowerment rather than alienation. Fundamental to the emergence of subcultures is the expansion of a youth market along with new spaces of leisure and consumption, yet for Hebdige there are still elements of resistance and communal solidarity within them that is not entirely subsumed by the capitalist process.

While the understanding of subcultures as subversive social formations is crucial to the Birmingham School's project, there is also a consistent acknowledgement that simply reinterpreting the materials of consumer culture does not challenge the basic structure of capitalism. As Hebdige writes, "no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced," which relies on industrialized modes of manufacture rooted in the exploitation of low-skilled labor.<sup>lxxii</sup> In the article "Hardcore: Subculture American Style," literary critic Susan Willis makes a similar point: "Subcultural

groups may appropriate, use, recycle and redefine cultural commodities, but their practices don't change capitalism as a mode of production. The spectacular designates the difference between cultural practice as a response to capitalism and political practice, which might have cultural dimensions but which aims at the transformation of capitalism."<sup>lxxiii</sup> Even for the CCCS, because subcultures are pitched at the symbolic level they may themselves be incorporated back into the dominant system of values and meanings: what begins as a collective self-image that organically grows out of provisional social arrangements can quickly become a commodified identity that is packaged and sold to youth by the culture industry. Nevertheless, subcultures offer both physical and symbolic spaces of relative autonomy and social belonging to individuals and groups that would otherwise be characterized by isolation and alienation.

In *Inside the Night* and *Are You Good Enough for the Cha Cha Cha?* (Fig. 15) Willats explored the nightlife scenes of various underground London clubs, where people abandoned their everyday identities and adopted different codes of dress and behavior that, for Willats, expressed a "counter-consciousness" to the individualistic values of Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher. In 1982, Willats met fashion designer and renowned nightlife figure Leigh Bowery at the Cha Cha Club, a smaller venue attached to Heaven, which was the largest discotheque in Europe for a primarily gay, male audience at the time. Willats was an outsider and feared being perceived as a narc because of his age and appearance, but he managed to befriend a number of people who organized and attended events at the Cha Cha Club, who would serve as the main protagonists of the collages he exhibited at the Lisson Gallery in 1983. As Willats writes, the Cha Cha Club was "created by friends for friends, so that they could freely express a sensibility and attitudes that were tangential, even alien from the normality of the dominant culture."<sup>lxxiv</sup> Willats noticed a distinct separation between the daytime and nighttime appearance

of attendees; there were no rigid distinctions between the organizers of events at the club and the people who showed up; making money was not the prime motive but rather creating a context for communal forms of self-expression through speech, clothing, hair and make-up, all to a soundtrack of music that could not be heard elsewhere. For Willats, these were creative responses to a social environment that rejected community and emphasized property and individual acquisition above all else—in refusing to subscribe to the values of the dominant culture, Willats called these spaces of temporary escape “capsules within a deterministic society.”

To produce *Are You Good Enough for the Cha Cha Cha?* Willats worked closely with Scarlet and Michael, who operated the club one night per week. He made tape-recordings of discussions with the organizers and attendees, who then helped Willats create collages consisting of photographs, texts, and various objects through a collaborative process (Willats also produced a special issue of *Audio Arts* called *Inside the Night* that consisted of recorded interviews with Scarlet, Michael and other attendees of the Cha Cha Club). Willats describes the collages he produces—which are determined largely by the subjects themselves, who contribute material that they feel is important and retain the right to veto anything in them—“democratic surfaces,” insofar as arrangements of text, photographs, and objects constitute a complex view of reality in which no one perspective or material predominates. Not unlike his projects with residents of tower block housing estates, in *Are You Good Enough for the Cha Cha Cha?* and *Inside the Night* Willats emphasizes the capacity of people to subvert the constraints placed on them by the dominant culture through organization and resourcefulness. As Tom Holert writes, “this interest in self-organized, symbolic spaces and worlds, which can be taken as an expression of a self but also of a group identity, as both an individual and a collective refusal of and flight from the

planned and regulated surroundings of a normality drafted by social technicians, speculators and urban planners, has defined Willats' projects since the mid-1970s.<sup>lxxv</sup>

Over the course of his career, Willats has sought to escape what he regards as the containment and isolation of art by moving beyond the space of the gallery and museum and into society in order to collaborate with alternative publics. In his various social projects, Willats wanted to create forms of art that were rooted in fluid, contextual modes of communication and reciprocity between the artist and audience that would reach beyond the elite, bourgeois audience of art; his call for artists to engage directly with specific social contexts through collaboration and participation points towards various debates characterizing socially-engaged and politicized art today. In recent years, artistic practices that attempt to overturn the traditional relationship between artist, art object, and audience have received increasing attention. Defined variously as “socially-engaged,” “relational,” “dialogic,” “littoral,” “participatory,” and “collaborative,” the art surveyed in key texts such as Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Nato Thompson’s *Living as Form* (2012), and Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012) generally strives to produce social change through a recalibration of the ways in which art relates to audiences and publics.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Such interest from art history and art criticism is matched at the institutional level as well. In addition to the proliferation of biennials and the expansion of commissioning agencies promoting public-minded and socially conscious art, the curatorial initiatives of Maria Lind and Charles Esche are the most prominent examples of what Claire Doherty has called the “New Institutionalism,” in which the working methods of contemporary artists—temporary projects, transience, open-endedness, flux—are reflected in the kinds of artworks galleries, museums, and

art center increasingly showcase: New Institutionalism “embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice, which is to employ dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption.”<sup>lxxvii</sup> This shift within art and its institutions—from the mythically autonomous work of art to its imbrication in society; from the lone artist in the studio producing objects to be sold and collected to an agent whose collaboration with an audience determines an often dematerialized outcome; from the repressive brick-and-mortar institution to a decentralized panoply of adaptive spaces encouraging interaction—is by and large commended by those analyzing these developments. In these accounts, dialogue is privileged over monologue, activity over passivity, open over closed form, flexibility over stability, the collective over the individual, and context over autonomy. The privileged terms are emblematic of a more democratic form of art which, which resists art’s commodification and neutralization at the hands of the market and/or traditional arts institutions.

Nevertheless, certain accounts of this shift have problematized its basic assumptions while demonstrating art’s relationship to economic changes inaugurated by the rise of neoliberalism. In various studies, art historians Miwon Kwon, James Meyer, Lane Relyea and Claire Bishop have shown the ways in which art that is open-ended, temporary, mobile and interactive does not simply contest the conventional distribution apparatus of art but also reflects what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have described as the “new spirit of capitalism.” Set against the backdrop of neoliberalism, these accounts argue that participatory art’s emphasis on networks, short-term projects, mobility and affective labor appears not so much to challenge the status quo but rather to imitate its organizational patterns, even while maintaining a critical relationship to capitalism.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Critics such as Claire Bishop have criticized the ways in which artworks are currently evaluated based on abstract metrics of participation

rather than the kinds of social relationships they engender through dialogue, open form, transience, and flexibility.<sup>lxxix</sup> For Bishop, it is crucial to consider not only the formal structure of the artwork (the degree of participation it encourages, how open-ended it is, etc.) but the types of audiences and publics that are asked to participate and the kinds of relationships the artwork generates: in short, who is summoned forth through these kinds of artworks and whose interests are served? Is it the artist, whose peripatetic engagements with various publics boost his or her career in the art world? Or is it the communities themselves, who are mobilized to take control of their environments and determine their lives to a greater degree because of the interactions and activities the artwork sets into effect?<sup>lxxx</sup>

In Willats' practice, he is preoccupied with the isolation of art and its institutions, which must be overcome through the development of an artistic practice that is rooted in a particular form of social engagement: collaboration with individuals and groups who do not currently constitute art's public. Through engaging with these alternative publics, Willats hoped to connect art and its institutions to different areas of society and produce artworks that could generate immediate political effects, mostly in relation to the praxis of everyday life. His social projects in tower block housing estates involve sustained engagements and close personal relationships with the contexts and communities in which he works; as an artist, he does not arrive to determine what should be done but rather initiates a process of critical reflection that generates collective solutions devised by the residents themselves. While many of the strategies he devised in the 1970s to exceed the institutional and formal constraints of art during this period have become buzzwords of contemporary art, Willats distinguishes himself from the empty formalism of "participatory" art by emphasizing the specific histories and narratives of the groups with which he works: in Willats' projects, a group is not an abstract category but a

particular aggregate of individuals that is responding to larger historical forces, whether in the form of the bureaucratic machinations of public housing in Great Britain or the cultural conformity of Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain. By working closely with particular communities who have been marginalized by the dominant culture and presenting them with the opportunity to engage with temporary spaces of reflection and representation, Willats' projects from the 1970s and 1980s serve as important precedents to artistic practices in the present that strive to enlarge the operative sphere of art and mobilize specific communities to transform their everyday lives and environments.



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<sup>i</sup> Stephen Willats, "The Counter-Consciousness in Vertical Living," *Control* 11 (1979).

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen Willats, "Inside the Night," *Art Monthly* 62 (1982).

<sup>iii</sup> See Brown, Paul, Charlie Gere, Nicholas Lambert and Catherine Mason, *White Heat Cold Logic: British Computer Art 1960-1980* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); Catherine Mason, *A Computer in the Art Room* (London: Quiller Press, 2008); Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995).

<sup>iv</sup> Catherine Mason, *A Computer in the Art Room*, 61.

<sup>v</sup> Brigitte Franzen, "On the Significance of Tower Block Architecture for Stephen Willats," in Stephen Willats, *Art Society Feedback*, ed. Anja Casser and Philipp Ziegler (Nuremberg: Badischer Kunstverein, 2011).

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>vii</sup> See Patrick Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945-75* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Lynsey Hansley, *Estates: an Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2007); Anne Power, *Estates on the Edge* (London: MacMillan, 1997).

<sup>viii</sup> *The Great British Housing Disaster*. Directed by Adam Curtis, BBC, 1984.

<sup>ix</sup> Stephen Willats, "The Externalisation of Models in Art Practice," *Control* 8 (1974), reprinted in Stephen Willats, *Art Society Feedback*, 326-331.

<sup>x</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 90.

<sup>xi</sup> Stephen Willats, "Extending the meaning in Art, a Basis for Operation: West London Resource Project and Meta Filter," *Audio Arts*, Vol. 3 No. 1, 1974. Audio Interview: <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/volume-3/number-1>.

<sup>xii</sup> Stephen Willats, "From Objects to People: Interaction in the Art Museum," *Kunst & Museum journal*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Amsterdam: 1994), reprinted in *Art Society Feedback*, 478-485.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>xiv</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade* (London: Allen Lane, 1980).

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<sup>xv</sup> Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Routledge, 1982).

<sup>xvi</sup> See Richard Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony: The Growth of Political Violence* (London: Penguin, 1980); Norman Shrapnel, *The Seventies: Britain's Inward March* (London: Constable, 1980); Phillip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1988).

<sup>xvii</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism vol. 4*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-94.

<sup>xviii</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998), 148-173.

<sup>xix</sup> Barbara Reise, "Greenberg and the Group: a retrospective view," *Studio International* (May 1968), 254-57.

<sup>xx</sup> Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008).

<sup>xxi</sup> As John A. Walker writes in *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, "A recurrent challenge facing radical artists was how to reach audiences beyond the narrow confines of the art world, how to convince political activists, local communities, campaigning groups, workers in factories or on strike, that art could be a valuable additional resource or weapon rather than merely an ornament or instrument of the Establishment. Art that was partisan—that sided with the exploited or foregrounded the experiences and needs of blacks, gays, the unemployed and women, for instance—challenged the conventional wisdom that art transcends such divisions and is universal in its appeal. Consequently, it was not simply a matter of increasing the size of the audience for art, but of developing new forms of art adapted to the needs of underprivileged groups, ethnic minorities, local communities, etc." John A. Walter, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 8.

<sup>xxii</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "The Success and Failure of Peter Fuller," *New Left Review*, 207: 1 (September-October 1994), 87-102.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For Burgin's discussion of the ubiquity and ideological functions of photography in everyday life, see Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Palgrave, 1982), 142-153.

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Conceptual Design: Stephen Willats in conversation with Christabel Stewart," <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/56/>, accessed February 12, 2018.

<sup>xxv</sup> Stephen Willats, "Cognition and Advertising," 286.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "Conceptual Design: Stephen Willats in conversation with Christabel Stewart."

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Stephen Willats, "Signs and Messages from Corporate America," in *Art Society Feedback*, 456.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Stephen Willats, "Artwork as Social Model," *Studio International*, Vol. 191, No. 80 (1976), reprinted in *Art Society Feedback*, 345.

<sup>xxix</sup> "Conceptual Design: Stephen Willats in conversation with Christabel Stewart."

<sup>xxx</sup> Stephen Willats, "Visual Transmitters" and "Visual Automatics and Visual Transmitters," in *Art Society Feedback*, 262-268.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Stephen Willats, "Xerox as an Agent of Social Change," in *Art Society Feedback*, 294-300.

<sup>xxxii</sup> For a brief overview of Gordon Pask's theoretical work and its relationship to his cybernetic sculptures, see María Fernández, "Gordon Pask: Cybernetic Polymath," *Leonardo*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2008), 162-168.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> In her introduction to *Chronophobia: On Time and Art of the 1960s*, Pamela M. Lee examines the split between the corporate backers of Art & Technology and the artists that were chosen for the project, focusing in particular on the confrontation between John Chamberlain and the RAND Corporation. See Pamela M. Lee, "Introduction: Eros and Technics and Civilization," in *Chronophobia: On Time and Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 4-36.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Jack Burnham, "Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed," in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Madison: Coda, 1980), 210.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Victor Pasmore, "What is Abstract Art?," *Sunday Times*, February 5, 1961, 21.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Stephen Willats, "Chronology 1958-69," compiled by Emily Pethick in conjunction with *Control. Stephen Willats. Work 1962-69*, exhibition at Raven Row, London. <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/57>, accessed February 18, 2018.

<sup>xxxix</sup> George Mallen, "Stephen Willats: An Interview on Art, Cybernetics and Social Intervention," *Page Sixty: Bulletin of the Computer Arts Society* (Spring 2005), 2.

<sup>xl</sup> Edward Shanken, "Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s," in *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 156.

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<sup>xli</sup> Roy Ascott, "Interactive Art," unpublished manuscript, 1994, in "Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s," 11.

<sup>xlii</sup> See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society, Tomorrow's Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society*, trans. Leonard F.X. Mayhew (New York: Random House, 1971).

<sup>xliii</sup> For a discussion of Roy Ascott's art and pedagogy, as well as the influence McLuhan had on his work and theorization of technology, see Edward A. Shanken, "From Cybernetics to Telematics: The Art, Pedagogy, and Theory of Roy Ascott," in *Roy Ascott, Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, ed. Edward A. Shanken (California: University of California Press, 2003), 1-97.

<sup>xliv</sup> David Mellor, *The Sixties Art Scene in London* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 107.

<sup>xl</sup> Shanken, "Cybernetics and Art," 155.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Geoffrey C. Bowker, "How to Be Universal: Some Cybernetic Strategies, 1943-70," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (February 1993), 117.

<sup>xlvii</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn 1994), 264.

<sup>xlix</sup> Reinhold Martin, "The Organizational Complex: Cybernetics, Space, Discourse," *Assemblage*, No. 37 (Dec., 1998), 102-127.

<sup>l</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter 1992), p. 4.

<sup>li</sup> Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy," 266.

<sup>lii</sup> Stephen Willats, 'Control Magazine', *Studio International*, vol. 193, no. 983 (September–October 1976), 161.

<sup>liii</sup> Anthony Hudek, "Meta-Magazine. Control 1965-68," Raven Row, <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/55/>.

<sup>liv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lv</sup> Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 15.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ibid., 31.

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<sup>lvii</sup> María Fernández, “Detached from HiStory: Jasia Reichardt and Cybernetic Serendipity,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Fall 2008), 6-23.

<sup>lviii</sup> Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 33.

<sup>lix</sup> Sharon Irish, “The Performance of Information Flows in the Art of Stephen Willats,” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2012), 457.

<sup>lx</sup> Stephen Willats, *Intervention and Audience* (London: Coracle Press, 1986).

<sup>lxi</sup> Stephen Willats, *The Artist as Instigator of Changes in Social Cognition and Behaviours* (London: Gallery House, 1973), 25.

<sup>lxii</sup> Willats, “Cognition and Advertising,” 287.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language, Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 2003), 101.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Willats, “Cognition and Advertising,” 286.

<sup>lxv</sup> Sharon Irish, “The Performance of Information Flows...”, 463.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Stephen Willats, “Visual Transmitters,” in *Art Society Feedback*, 263.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 128-131.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Stephen Willats, “Reflections on Meta Filter,” in *Art Society Feedback*, 310.

<sup>lxix</sup> Stephen Willats, quoted in Grant Kester, “Starting from Zero: Stephen Willats and the Pragmatics of Public Art,” *Afterimage* 19 (May 1992), 10.

<sup>lxx</sup> Stephen Willats, “Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp,” in *Art Society Feedback*, 382-392.

<sup>lxxi</sup> John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, “Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 2003), 25.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 130.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Susan Willis, “Hardcore: Subculture American Style,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter 1993), 366.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Willats, “Inside the Night,” in *Art Society Feedback*, 403.

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<sup>lxxv</sup> Tom Holert, "Capsules out of Control: Stephen Willats and the Heuristics of the Margins," in *Art Society Feedback*, 65.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> See *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 1998); Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013); Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Claire Doherty, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," *Art of encounter. Engage review*, Vol. 15 (Summer 2004), 6.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*; Miwon Kwon, "Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After," in *Work Ethic*. ed. Helen Molesworth (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2004), 83-97; James Meyer, "The Functional Site," in *Space, Site, Interventions: Situating Installation Art*. Ed. Erika Suderberg (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23-37; Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn 2004) 51-79.

<sup>lxxx</sup> For a discussion of the politics of what Hal Foster calls the "ethnographic turn" in art since the 1960s, in which artists identify their practices with various cultural "others"—post-colonial, subaltern, subcultural—see Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 171-205.

### *III. Feminism in 1970s Britain (Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, Jo Spence)*

In Britain, the feminist interventions of the 1970s introduced the question of gender and identity into art and its institutions.<sup>i</sup> Up to the late 1960s, a previously hegemonic modernist theory imported from the United States framed aesthetic experience in terms of its autonomy (i.e., its separation from politics and the transcendence of the individual) and its medium-specificity (i.e., an attentiveness to the material constraints and limits of painting and sculpture).<sup>ii</sup> As I have described above, the abandonment of Greenbergian modernism by many artists in Great Britain in the 1970s in favor of more socially and politically oriented art practices is a crucial dimension of British art's trajectory during this decade.<sup>iii</sup> A result of the women's movement in Britain that began in the late 1960s and gained broader traction throughout the 1970s, feminism's inclusion of the gendered subject into an examination of art production, exhibition and distribution was rooted in a broader interrogation of the critical role sexual difference plays in discourses, laws, and society. Feminist theory and activity were major catalysts in the explosive heterogeneity of artistic practices that characterized the 1970s in Britain, most particularly in the various attempts to renegotiate art and artists' relationship to art institutions. During the 1970s, feminist artists created alternative spaces, distributed journals and magazines that served as a critical counterpoint to mainstream arts publications, and produced critical interventions within mainstream venues such as the ICA or Hayward Gallery.

Informed by Althusserian Marxism and psychoanalytical theories of subjectivity, feminist artists and critics such as Mary Kelly, Jo Spence, Juliet Mitchell, and Jacqueline

Rose strove to articulate how women are positioned as negative or subjected figures within patriarchal symbolic structures.<sup>iv</sup> This chapter will chart several feminist strategies that challenged women's marginal status in art institutions and society. The general trajectory of feminist art practices during the 1970s can be discerned in the shift from biological and essentialist notions of female difference towards attempts to comprehend how the female subject is produced through social, ideological and symbolic processes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist artistic practices are characterized initially by a preoccupation with creating images and texts that foster positive identifications with particular ideas of 'femininity' (embodied in figurative paintings that celebrate mother-goddess figures or texts that envision utopian worlds absent of masculine power) in the service of consciousness-raising and creating alternative support systems for women.<sup>v</sup> This moment of female empowerment then opens onto a wholesale interrogation of the underlying mechanisms and structures of representation (language, images, etc.) that produce the 'feminine' subject and her negative and excluded position in institutions and discourse. In distancing feminine identity from the pre-given (i.e., anatomical distinctions between the sexes), feminist artists theorized the 'feminine' subject position as the product of discourse rather than the inevitable outcome of biological difference. By revealing the ideological instance of women's subjection and foregrounding the ways in which identity is a precarious construction, feminist artists wanted to demonstrate that the so-called "natural" divisions between men and women were socially-produced and open to challenges, critiques, and revisions.

My focus in this dissertation has been to examine the various strategies British artists in the 1970s deployed in order to renegotiate their relationship to art institutions



and the very role of the artist itself. While the 1970s has proven somewhat resistant to categorization, appearing to lack a central organizing principle due to the heterogeneity of artistic practices that emerged during this period, the pressure of politics and feminism especially forced art into a confrontation with contemporary social issues. Artists dissatisfied with art's distance from politics and society produced what has been defined as "social purpose" art. "Social purpose" art relinquishes its alleged autonomy in order to interface with society towards particular ends: abandoning the model of the isolated studio artist producing works to be exhibited in galleries and museums and sold on the market, "social purpose" art critically intervenes in contemporary socio-political issues in order to effect change and disrupt conventional ideas surrounding the position of the artist (i.e., creative genius), the role of art (i.e., entertainment, pleasure) and the audience to which it is addressed (i.e., elite, bourgeois).<sup>vi</sup>

In the previous chapter, I describe how Stephen Willats attempted to circumvent the isolation of art by operating primarily outside its brick-and-mortar institutions—once beyond the gallery and museum and produced collaboratively with publics who were excluded from the art establishment (subcultures, disaffected youth, tower block residents), he felt the works he created would expand the scope of art to include what had previously been beyond its domain. In his writings and interviews, Willats lamented the increasingly narrow concerns of the art he encountered in galleries in the late 1950s and 1960s, and much of his artistic career involved liquidating art's autonomy in order to relate it to the everyday lives of communities that did not belong to the gallery-going public. Similarly, the Artist Placement Group, in creating a bureaucratic organization that secured "placements" for artists within governmental or corporate contexts, wanted to

discover new roles and capacities for the artist that did not involve producing commodities for the art market. The artists deployed by the Artist Placement Group operated as “consultants” to businesses and government departments, offering up a type of affective labor instead of creating objects.<sup>vii</sup> Conrad Atkinson—whose work will be addressed in the following chapter—did not hope to abandon the museum or gallery but wanted to re-purpose these institutional spaces to become information platforms that drew attention to critical issues, all in some way or another addressing the deleterious effects of capitalism. In renouncing art’s separation from or elevation above social and political issues, Atkinson strove to intervene in public crises in order to produce progressive reforms in British governmental policy.

The artists addressed in this chapter—Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, and Jo Spence—were uniquely poised to challenge art institutions since they had been historically excluded from them. Because women were marginalized by the dominant culture, they did not have the same access to the professional circuit of exhibiting in galleries and museums and teaching at universities that their male counterparts enjoyed. Indeed, the decision to become an artist as a woman presented a number of difficulties, a contradiction that Kelly, Hiller and Spence explore extensively in their work and one that is emphasized by Griselda Pollock in her essay on the Hayward Annual of 1978, which will be examined below.<sup>viii</sup> Due to the degree to which women were excluded from museums and galleries, feminist artists in the 1970s produced the strongest theoretical critique of Modernism while also creating a remarkable network of groups, exhibitions, publications and spaces that functioned as independent support systems and counter-institutions. Publications such as *Spare Rib*, *Feminist Art News*, and *m/f*, the exhibitions

“Womanpower,” “Feministo,” and “Women’s Work,” and groups such as the Women’s Art History Collective, the Lacan Women’s Study Group, the History Group, the Women’s Workshop of the Artists’ Union, the Women’s Liberation Art Group, the South London Women’s Art Group, the Women’s Free Art Alliance, the Women Artists Collective, and the Women Artists Slide Library attest to the vast reservoir of feminist artists’ decentralizing activities in the 1970s.

Modernism privileged aesthetic contemplation by a disembodied eye in absence of the historical and social conditions of perception; feminism demonstrated not only the exclusions of this tradition but also the implausibility of disassociating perceptions and representations from gendered embodiment and social, historical, and ideological processes. The proliferation of alternative spaces and publications in the 1970s was in part a result of conventional art institutions’ inability to keep pace with the rapid development of artistic practices that did not take the form of painting or sculpture. However, an account of the development of alternative spaces that does not take into consideration the social and institutional marginalization of women is bound to remain inadequate.

Even as Modernism began to fold under the weight of sustained critiques, Mary Kelly expressed disappointment with the extent to which the most advanced artists fell short of acknowledging the critical role that feminism—and other radical movements of the period—played in dismantling it. Reflecting on the conference “The State of British Art” held at the ICA in 1978, Kelly argued that the issues debated would never have emerged in an art context were it not for radical students, black activists, and women. Nevertheless, this debt went unacknowledged as artists, critics and art historians engaged

in disagreements that Kelly characterized as a battle of “the sons against the fathers,” with social artists and critics playing the role of the former and those defending Modernism the latter.<sup>ix</sup> Moreover, in her own contribution to the portion of the conference titled “The Crisis in Professionalism,” Kelly stated that “ironically, the women’s art movement is still considered politically marginal at a time when most male practitioners of ‘social purpose art’ are political voyeurs, while most women artists have shared a grassroots involvement in the women’s movement, have felt their political commitments deeply, and have fought for them daily in their personal lives.”<sup>x</sup> Kelly’s critical and artistic work strove to highlight the extent to which Modernism was unraveled as a result of political struggles occurring outside the domain of art, and she contends that feminism played a crucial role in this dialectic. Kelly argues that feminist art was not simply a period style but rather a “problematic” that would have far-reaching consequences for the development of art in the wake of its emergence: “feminism infiltrated or overtly influenced every art (or un-art-) making process of that moment in distinct and irreversible ways: *notably, by transforming the phenomenological presence of the body into an image of sexual difference, extending the interrogation of the object to include the subjective conditions of existence, turning political intent into personal accountability, and translating institutional critique into the question of authority.*”<sup>xi</sup> Feminism, then, is by no means a marginal, alternative movement but absolutely central to the development of politicized art practices that began to emerge in the late 1960s, which would proliferate throughout the 1970s and have a profound influence on the field of contemporary art.

This chapter will chart the circulation of feminist art and particular debates in feminist art and theory in 1970s London. The feminist artistic practices addressed here are diagnostic, critical, and deconstructive (and not necessarily “liberatory”) insofar as they address the contradictory and negative status of women in relation to the particular institutions and contexts in which they are situated—the family, the gallery/museum, society, etc.—instead of postulating a mythical utopia outside of them. As mentioned above, Stephen Willats believed art could take on a more social and political character if it was no longer exclusively tethered to institutional spaces like the museum and gallery. However, for women who had never enjoyed institutional acceptance and representation, what would the significance be of abandoning a position that had never been occupied in the first place? During the 1970s, the question of female artists’ institutional representation in museums and galleries becomes a topic of debate, with responses ranging from efforts at separatism to attempts at ignoring the factor of gender altogether. The feminist art I will address in this chapter takes as its starting point the fact of sexual difference—a fact that is not merely biologically determined but is constructed through social and ideological processes—and aims to comprehend the operation of patriarchal power in order to dismantle it. If the machinations of women’s oppression can be analyzed and worked over, then it becomes possible to loosen and deconstruct the constraints placed on women in society. As Kelly states, “when you say either that we’re absolutely constrained by patriarchy or it’s only a matter of false consciousness to be shaken off, that, for me, is when you come up with a much more constricting view...there is no preexisting sexuality, no essential femininity...to look at the processes of their

construction is also to see the possibility of deconstructing the dominant forms of representing difference and justifying subordination in our social order.”<sup>xii</sup>

My entry point into these debates is a recorded discussion between feminist artists Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly. Published in 1977 as Vol. 3, No. 3, “Ideology and Consciousness” (Fig. 16) is an *Audio Arts* cassette that features a lecture by Conrad Atkinson on side A and a conversation between Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly on “Women’s Practice in Art” on side B.<sup>xiii</sup> The Free International University, founded by Joseph Beuys on April 27, 1973 in his Düsseldorf studio, hosted both talks in London. The discussion between Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly contained on *Audio Arts* Vol. 3, No. 3 is a good point of departure to begin examining the intellectual stakes of their at times divergent interpretations of ‘women’s practice in art’: their disagreements on how women should confront patriarchal oppression in the art world and outside its confines demonstrate that feminism in the 1970s was by no means a unified and stable discourse but rather a discursive field marked by productive tensions and contradictions.

The tape begins with an introduction by William Furlong, the founder of *Audio Arts*, which mentions the Women’s Free Art Alliance, an organization founded by Kathy Nairne and Joanna Walton. Their framework was not the visual arts but theatre, dance and therapy; they founded a women’s art center in 1972, registered as a charity in 1974 and had their first exhibition at King Henry’s Road, Chalk Farm, London on Valentine’s Day in 1975. The show, titled “Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Shown,” contained a wide range of work in various media, including pottery, crafts, and performance, which had not yet been mandated by mainstream art institutions as accepted mediums for ‘fine art.’ The exhibition brought together artists who both were and were not involved in the

Women's Movement, and its motivating premise sprang from the recognition that women's creative potential was repressed and restricted by dominant forms of education and exhibition, which were in large part formulated by men. The Women's Free Art Alliance emphasized that all women had a creative capacity that had historically been marginalized (in domestic duties or handicraft, for example) and could only be actualized given the proper context and support system, which would have to be organized by women themselves. The Women's Free Art Alliance was marked by an emergent ethics of self-exploration and self-discovery that characterized growth movement therapies of the period, which aimed to circumscribe a realm specific to women that would offer autonomy from patriarchal society and its institutions. As Kathy Nairne comments, "We wanted to give ourselves, physically and emotionally, space to develop ourselves and our creativity. If we were not what men said we were, what were we?"<sup>xiv</sup>

The emergence of consciousness-raising feminist groups that offered independent means of exhibiting for women was the first movement towards critiquing male-dominated art institutions. However, many female artists were not satisfied to simply exist as an alternative to the dominant culture but desired a wholesale critique from within its institutional spaces. For these artists, 'alternative' and 'dominant' were not mutually exclusive and oppositional terms but formed a symbiotic relationship.<sup>xv</sup> If one never entirely escapes the dominant culture, then, feminist interventions must be made not only on the periphery but also at the center of the conventional circuits for producing, exhibiting, and distributing art. As Griselda Pollock writes, "by remaining outside public institutions and therefore invisible to them and their critical discourses, women endorse

their place in the separate sphere historically created for their work, thereby colluding in their own marginalization.”<sup>xvi</sup>

For Kelly, the growth of women’s groups in the 1970s marked a historical moment in which there emerged a shared sense of marginalization among women who were beginning to critique the social and symbolic structures from which they were excluded, both within and beyond art institutions. The challenge presented by the Women’s Free Art Alliance offered a solution—female empowerment through organizing independent exhibitions and not subjecting women to the standards of a male-dominated art world—but also brought about a series of contradictions and questions that would lead to debates among artists engaged with the Women’s Movement and feminism: should women seek out institutional validation for their creative work through the acceptance of conventional arts institutions (‘professionalization’) or should they strive to create independent contexts that circumvent the traditional channels for the production, exhibition, and distribution of art? Is there a specific, separate and stable essence of femininity that can be identified across different artistic practices by women (and should female artists be preoccupied with communicating and supporting this difference) or is ‘femininity’ a contingent construct formed by economic, ideological and political factors and produced in opposition to what is deemed to be ‘masculine’? Should women hitch their artistic productions to the political urgency of the Women’s Movement, emphasizing communication, access, and intelligibility, or should they aim to analytically deconstruct and undermine systems of meaning production in images and texts—a strategy that came to be defined as a “politics of representation”—which, while at the intellectual and aesthetic vanguard of contemporary art practices, could perhaps



alienate viewers who were not conversant in the debates surrounding post-conceptual art? One of the principal rallying cries of the Women's Movement was "the personal is political"; Kelly and Hiller, while artists informed by the Women's Movement, offer divergent interpretations of what constitutes "the personal" that embody some of the major tensions in feminist artistic practice and women's political mobilization in the 1970s.

In her discussion with Kelly, Susan Hiller stresses that her work starts from an idea of *subjective* experience, or what she describes as the "necessity for truth-telling in art." For Hiller, women are alienated from the mainstream of symbolic discourse—language, law, institutions—because these have been created within a patriarchal order: as women, Hiller states, "we are not permitted to speak our own language."<sup>xvii</sup> While not advocating a strict separation between male and female language (she concedes that theoretically men and women speak the same language), Hiller suggests her work is engaged in seeking out domains of lived experience that are not registered in symbolic structures or in the discourses of art, or what she calls the "paraconceptual." Another way to characterize what Hiller seeks to represent in her work are the discontinuities and disjunctions of her own interiority and psychology when set against the more public or social spheres in which that immediacy is represented.

In *Ten Months* (1977-79) (*Fig. 17*), Hiller created a photo-text work that documents her own pregnancy. Arranging a sequence of black-and-white photographs of her pregnant stomach in a grid formation with accompanying texts taken from her diary over the course of her pregnancy, Hiller produces an analytical meditation that avoids the conventional and sentimental ways in which the process is conventionally represented.<sup>xviii</sup>

Instead, Hiller isolates and abstracts the zone that serves as the object of *Ten Months*, estranging her stomach from her body to produce a clinical documentation of her transforming body that resembles a lunar calendar. Historically, the female nude in art emerged in relationship to the natural landscape, with the gentle curves of the female body echoed by the rolling hills far in the distance: the female nude forges a direct correlation drawn between the female body and Nature, which is offered up to an assumed male viewer (e.g., Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*). In her work, however, Hiller draws a comparison between the female body and Nature but in so doing evacuates the assumed male pleasure, or *scopophilia*, in looking upon the female body. Any sensualism or eroticism is evacuated from the images, a privation that is further reinforced by the subjective "I" of the artist whose thoughts accompany the photographs in the form of text. If the female nude epitomizes the asymmetry of an active male viewer and a passive female object—the classical nude, of course, either does not return the look or does so as a means of signaling consent—Hiller stages an encounter in which the female body is fragmented and male desire is blocked by the withdrawal of the body and the presence of Hiller's own words.

The photographic element of *Ten Months* can be compared to the use of serialism and bureaucratic modes of documentation in conceptual art to dissolve the artist's subjectivity, or what Benjamin Buchloh has called an "aesthetics of administration."<sup>xix</sup> In the photographs included in *Ten Months*, Hiller takes a distant approach to her own body, utilizing the photograph as a neutral document to record a phenomenon that comes across as analytical instead of affective, despite the fact that it is Hiller herself who functions as subject and object in the work. Moreover, the layout of the photographs on the wall,

descending from left to right, can be related to the modular strategies of minimalism and conceptual art, which aimed to remove the arbitrary subjectivity of the artist in the act of composition.<sup>xx</sup> However, Hiller's decision to include entries from her diary alongside the photographs rubs against the grain of these movements' attempts to distance the artist from the work itself. Hiller pairs her own thoughts—representing her subjective experience—with a photographic mode reminiscent of conceptual art to emphasize the tensions and contradictions operative in being a female artist. “She speaks (as a woman) about everything,” reads one of the texts, “although they wish her to speak only about women's things. They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak ‘as a woman,’ only if she will agree in advance to play the artist's role as neutral (neuter) observer. She does not speak (as a woman) about anything, although they want her to. There is nothing she can speak of ‘as a woman.’ As a woman, she can not speak.”<sup>xxi</sup> If the visual strategies Hiller deploys can be related to Minimalism and Conceptual Art's attempts to distance the artwork from its author, this intrusion of the author's voice problematizes any notion of a direct and unmediated influence. Hiller emphasizes the somewhat impossible position women occupy as speaking subjects, insofar as women can only speak from a place of marginal specificity. The ‘universal’ subject, encoded in our laws and institutions, is masculine—once she speaks from this unmarked, dominant position, she is asked to leave her identity behind. If, however, she continues to speak as a woman—which she is—she will not be heard: “as a woman, she can not speak.” Hiller's work explores the interstices between a subjective, feminine experience and an objective order defined by masculine power: as she states, “the subjective ‘I’ and objective ‘I’ are not unified for the female artist.”<sup>xxii</sup> She privileges the terrain of

subjective experience as a means to undo its erasure by patriarchal society, whose culture and language she describes as an “overview,” calling to mind an aerial photograph which, in conveying large swathes of land, fails to convey the actual texture and complexity of life on the ground.

Hiller begins with the immediacy of her own subjective experience and works out towards more general observations from that point. While Hiller and Kelly may arrive at similar conclusions regarding women’s position in a male-dominated society, they have different ways of arriving there. Hiller’s point of departure is the direct experience of her own subjectivity; Kelly “strongly objects” to her practice being based on felt experience, and chooses to create interventions in discourses that abandon any notion of the “truth” of lived immediacy in favor of an analytical examination of how the female subject is constituted within symbolic structures. In short, if Hiller works out towards the general from a place of feminine particularity that is not encoded in symbolic structures, Kelly makes the case that there is no escape from symbolic structures, and the task of feminist art is to explore the contradictions of women’s negative subject position in society. While situating the feminine subject position as a mere “symptom” of a masculine order may run the risk of becoming politically defeatist and trans-historical, for Kelly it is through a critical analysis of this negative space that it becomes possible to envision its deconstruction, which can potentially lead to social and political change.

Rather than treating women’s lived experience as a separate “reality” that then becomes diluted or blocked once it enters into the symbolic structures of patriarchal society, Kelly utilizes Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity to describe the ways in which women are inculcated into an order that positions them as inferior beings.

In emphasizing the activity of ideology in securing the marginal position of women, Kelly does not suggest that it is possible to simply expose the ideological instance and dissolve women's oppression; however, she does argue that art has the capacity to re-work ideology, which can destabilize and undermine its machinations. Kelly's difference from Hiller can be discerned in Kelly's understanding of subjectivity. For Hiller, feminine subjectivity is located somewhere outside of the dominant culture since it is either repressed or marginalized, having no place within it. Therefore, she can make the case that feminine subjectivity is not registered by the dominant culture, which she refers to as its 'paraconceptual' status. In contrast, Kelly makes the case that there is no subjectivity, feminine or otherwise, independent of language and society. Our subjectivity does not precede entry into symbolic structures and we do not have access to ourselves without them—subjectivity, then, is a *result* of having encountered and internalized the symbolic meanings of language, law, and institutions.<sup>xxiii</sup> Kelly's understanding of ideology is indebted to Althusser's formulation in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)," insofar as ideology is not a type of false consciousness that overwrites "reality" but rather operates as the condition of possibility for being a subject itself: as Althusser writes, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects."<sup>xxiv</sup> While Althusser emphasizes the incorporation of the subject into educational and juridical systems of power, this subjecthood should not exclusively be understood as pure subjection, since the "interpellation" of the individual does not consequently erase all

possibility of resistance and autonomy. The veil of ideology, though, cannot be lifted to reveal a utopia beneath its repressions. Instead, ideology is the site of an active struggle over meanings and representations in society, which can be contested and reformulated. Kelly describes her artistic practice as “secondary revisions” of theory and her own experience. She does not simply transpose theoretical formations wholesale onto her lived experience but explores the tensions that result when they brush up against one another. Feminine subjectivity, then, is not assumed to be a site of absolute truth, as it might be construed in Hiller’s work; instead, the ‘feminine’ position is itself formed in relation to what is deemed ‘masculine,’ which destabilizes both identities since her work reveals them both as precarious constructions.

Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1976-80) (Figs. 18, 19, + 20) is a complex work that examines her experience of motherhood and the socialization of her son over six sections, comprising a total of 139 individual parts. Straying from conventional and sentimental depictions of motherhood, which emphasize the ‘natural’ intimate bond between mother and child, Kelly explores the social contingencies and psychological disjunctions of this relationship through compiling its material traces; the mother-child dyad is not represented holistically in images but rather through the fragmented indexes of her son’s transcribed speech, his soiled diapers, her diaries, and his dietary regime, among others. While Kelly’s authorial voice is presented in the diaries’ confessional tone of her anxieties as a mother, she does not want her account to come across as purely autobiographical—the subject of *Post-Partum Document* is of course deeply personal, but the format of the work as well as the inclusion of Lacanian schemas and graphs demonstrates that the personal and subjective is mediated and governed by a third term:

the symbolic order. Rather than offering up her subjective experience as a kind of lived immediacy that is outside society, Kelly explores the intrusion of the symbolic into the pre-Oedipal dual relation of mother and child, tracking the role of language and ideology in the formation of her child's sense of self as well as her own psychological investments as a mother. As Kelly states, "I was trying to challenge the notion that motherhood represents some kind of unspeakable otherness. I wanted to make it apparent that this experience is very much within the order of language in the widest sense of the term."<sup>xxv</sup>

The trauma of separation marks each section of *Post-Partum Document*: rather than treating the early stages of her child's life as a mythical unity with the mother, each phase of his development is shot through with the strictures of the symbolic. *Weaning from the Breast* is the first section, which charts the first division that drives a wedge between mother and child. The child, born helpless and remaining so for quite some time, is crucially dependent on the mother's body for nourishment and contact, but this relationship cannot be sustained since the child must move beyond this state of maternal envelopment in order to engage with the world and others. Section II, titled *Weaning from the Holophrase*, focuses on the child's first utterances. The child first produces and repeats incoherent sounds that are in turn heard and interpreted by the mother as possessing significance. The mother endows the child's words with meaning—in this instance, the mother is a mediating figure in the child's entry into language. Yet this intersubjective moment between mother and child also marks the point at which the child becomes alienated from himself through his very entry into language. As Lacan points out, we do not possess language but language speaks us—it is only through inhabiting a linguistic structure that precedes our being that we can attain the status of speaking

subject.<sup>xxvi</sup> The third part—*Weaning from the Dyad*—covers familiar Freudian territory, tracing the Oedipal scenario, the intrusion of the father into the mother-child relationship, not so much through his actual presence but in Kelly's evoking him through speech. This section includes her son's drawings and recorded conversations between Kelly and her child, which show his increasing use of 'I,' marking the point at which he begins to recognize himself as separate from her. Section four—*On Femininity*—focuses on Kelly's own thoughts, desires, and fantasies, represented by physical impressions made by the child (a cast of the child's fist for example) and objects used by him (a blanket). This section examines the increasing gulf between the mother and child since their relationship is characterized by the prohibition of incest enforced by the father. These material traces of the mother-child relationship become fetish objects for the mother, who attempts to compensate for the loss of the child through assembling these surrogate objects that bear an indexical relationship to her son. The fifth part, *On the Order of Things*, charts her son's interest in the anatomical distinctions between men and women, which in turn causes the mother to reconsider her own passage through this phase. In distinguishing between male and female, both mother and child consider the ramifications of sexual difference, with the son adopting a masculine position and the mother reconsidering unconscious fantasies of her assumption of a feminine position defined by 'lack' (lack of a penis), which is ultimately compensated for by having a male child (the mother, according to Freud, is stricken by 'penis envy' upon realizing that she does not have one; she finds a solution for this 'envy' in the form of bearing a male child). The sixth and final section represents the full entry of the child into language and the complete separation between mother and child: he emerges as a speaking, sexed



subject, represented by his learning to write his own name and assemble his thoughts coherently.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In “Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation in feminist practice—a Brechtian perspective,” Griselda Pollock situates Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* within a range of artistic practices by women that return to Brecht’s strategy of ‘distanciation’ or *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>xxviii</sup> In brief, Brecht’s technique is an attempt to prevent the spectator from becoming entirely “lost” in a theatrical production; instead, Brecht strives to interrupt any immediate identifications and stirrings of emotion, allowing the viewer to become conscious of the staged nature of the play as well as the social, historical and political ramifications of it. Brecht does not want the spectator to simply be swept away and transported into a fictional realm that is distant and closed off from reality; far from the passive recipient of already digested messages, the spectator should be *active*, critically piecing together symbols, gestures and speech to comprehend the ways in which the contradictions of society have been condensed into a complex form. Pollock relates Brecht and ‘distanciation’ to a number of “dis-identificatory practices” emerging from the British context in the 1970s, inspired in part by theorizations in the British cinema journal *Screen*. As Pollock writes, “Dis-identificatory practices refer to the strategies for displacing the spectator from identifying with the illusory fictional worlds offered in art, literature and film disrupting the ‘dance of ideology’ which engages us on behalf of oppressive regimes of class, sexist, heterosexist and racist classifications and placements.”<sup>xxix</sup> In *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly interrupts any sense of first-person interiority by demonstrating that even what is considered most intimate and ‘natural’—her relationship with her child—is mediated by social

expectations and governed by a reticulated network of relationships (the father interrupts the mother-child dyad, the mother experiences loss upon the child's entry into language, the mother must contend with inherited values related to the sexual division of labor in child care). Rather than a direct expression of Kelly's autobiography that the viewer receives passively, *Post Partum Document* sets into motion a series of writings, diagrams, and material traces that requires the viewer to actively participate in the construction of meaning.

Another way in which Kelly employs a strategy of 'distanciation' in *Post Partum Document* is through removing any images of the mother and child. Kelly leaves out depictions of herself and her child and replaces them with different forms of inscription: analytical diagrams, indexical signs that bear an existential relationship to her son, and diary narratives. Since these images could be related to previous iconographic traditions of maternity (the Virgin Mary and Jesus in religious art, or bourgeois motherhood in Mary Cassatt), Kelly strives to prevent identifications that have become 'naturalized' so the viewer of *Post Partum Document* can engage critically with the subject of motherhood and the socialization of her male child. Kelly contends that depriving the viewer of figurative content inverts the (male) scopophilia of the dominant culture but may also have unintended consequences, namely never getting the viewer's attention in the first place. Indeed, the replacement of images by text in conceptual art has at times inspired negative critical reactions, boredom and disengagement. However, Kelly argues that despite withholding imaginary identifications she can still manage to bring the viewer into the work through the immediacy of her diary narrative: "this acts as a kind of 'capture' of the viewer which precedes recognition of the analytical texts. For me it's

absolutely crucial that this kind of pleasure in the texts, in the objects, should engage the viewer, because there is no point at which it can become a deconstructed critical engagement if the viewer is not first—immediately and affectively—drawn into the work.”<sup>xxx</sup> Rather than effecting a wholesale evacuation of pleasure that might come about as a result of denying the viewer figurative representations, Kelly offsets the potential pitfalls of ‘dis-identificatory’ practices by making the viewer shuttle back and forth between affect (her voice contained in the diaries) and analysis (Lacanian schemas). Moreover, the uproar that *Post Partum Document* caused in the popular press, centered largely around the presence of the soiled diapers that were exhibited at the ICA, made it abundantly clear that Kelly had viewers’ and critics’ attention.

To return to the discussion between Hiller and Kelly: Hiller articulates a concern over the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis by Kelly since it requires a level of prior knowledge of the field in order for viewers to understand *Post-Partum Document*. “With your [*Post-Partum Document*] show at the ICA,” Hiller remarks, “if [people] were familiar with the background material, they got the point of the piece, they were very interested...otherwise, they were excluded.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Kelly pushes back against this characterization of her work, arguing that artists should not be discouraged from making art that necessitates a certain amount of intellectual work on the part of the viewer, which can “stretch the limits of the problem [women] are dealing with.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Kelly’s use of psychoanalysis can be related to Pollock’s argument for a Brechtian reading of *Post-Partum Document*, insofar as Kelly installs a distance between her work and conventional representations of motherhood and early childhood that opens up a space for a critical analysis of socialization and subjectivity that is not rooted in ‘naturalized’

assumptions. Furthermore, Kelly's engagement with psychoanalysis is not simply an abstract decision made in isolation but predicated on her social involvement with the women's movement. "We're all into the same sort of questions...you can see how we got into psychoanalysis," responds Kelly in her discussion with Hiller. During the 1970s, psychoanalysis became a critical tool that offered crucial insights into how gender identity is a precarious construction somewhere between biology and society, which would have important effects on feminist theory and art.

Kelly, not unlike many feminists of her generation, engaged with psychoanalysis. The preeminent text that marked this shift within the Women's Movement of the 1970s was Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), a work inspired by a critical elaboration and re-reading of Freud (among other psychoanalysts) that sparked a serious debate surrounding the value of the discipline to feminism. Mitchell offered a re-evaluation of Freud's ideas at a time when he was considered by many in the women's movement to be politically reactionary. As Mitchell states, "if we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect psychoanalysis."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Eight years earlier, Mitchell authored an essay titled "Women: The Longest Revolution" that demonstrated one of contemporary socialism's major omissions in its analysis of bourgeois society: the oppression of women. "The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognized by all the great socialist thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is part of the classical heritage of the revolutionary movement. Yet today, in the West, the problem has become a subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupations of socialists. Perhaps no other major issue has been so forgotten," writes Mitchell.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Mitchell's analysis of the New Left's blindness

on issues relating to sexuality, reproduction and motherhood was also inspired in part by her experience with the movement and the noticeable absence of women in its ranks. Psychoanalysis, then, was an area of research in which issues relating to gender that were suppressed by the left's almost exclusive preoccupation with class analysis found a crucial expression, which feminists pursued adamantly to theorize the ideological underpinnings of women's oppression.

In 1973, Kelly and Laura Mulvey became founding members of the Lacan Women's Study Group, which included Rosalind Delmar, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. The Lacan Women's Study Group and the History Group, which was devoted to the study of Karl Marx and was attended by Mitchell, Delmar and Kelly as well, formed a nexus in which Marxist theories of ideology and psychoanalytic theories of femininity were brought together. Jacqueline Rose argues that, prior to the 1970s, ideology, which was traditionally framed in terms of a class-based analysis of the dominance of the bourgeoisie, and female sexuality, which was rooted in theories of sexual difference in psychoanalysis, were "historically severed" from one another until feminism "forged, or rather demonstrated, the links."<sup>xxxv</sup> At the time, Kelly, Mitchell, and Rose's utilization of psychoanalysis in their work was a counter-intuitive strategy, insofar as psychoanalysis was believed by feminists of earlier (and even contemporary) generations to be the epitome of patriarchal discourse: in its basic schema, women are positioned as inferior beings in relation to their masculine counterparts. Inasmuch as Freud developed theories that appeared to give the ideological oppression of women a "scientific" basis, he was considered by many feminists to be an enemy of the women's movement. How, then,

does Freud theorize femininity and how in turn did he come to be useful to theorists and artists attempting to articulate and challenge the ideological oppression of women?

As the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud developed a series of explanatory scenarios that describe the development of the individual from birth through infancy and into adolescence. The most powerful scenario for Freud, of course, was the Oedipus complex: each individual must pass through it on the path to selfhood, no one escapes its contradictions and its scars—which Freud called “neuroses”—and this trajectory is experienced differently by boys and girls.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Oedipus complex takes place from the third- to fifth-year of a child’s life, and involves an erotic attachment to one parent (in the eponymous scenario, the male child to the mother) that breeds hostility and aggression towards the other (the male child towards the father). At the onset of the Oedipus complex, the male child, enjoying the nurturing and sense of omnipotence fostered by the mother, desires what she offers him—the satisfaction of his needs and the answering of his demands—and develops a strong affective bond to her. The father intervenes at this critical moment in the child’s development to ensure that the child cannot indeed have the mother: the father is the embodiment of the law, the prohibition of incest, which is the foundation of society itself. Therefore, the father is the agent of castration (what Lacan called the “*nom/non-du père*”), who prevents the child from realizing what was conjured up in fantasy, who must abandon his socially unacceptable desire for the mother in order to enter into society.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Freud described this form of conflict as the “positive” Oedipus complex, which differs from the young girl’s “negative” Oedipus complex.

While the threat of castration marks the terminal point of the Oedipus complex for boys, who must renounce desire for the mother and enter the latency period, the

awareness of castration marks the girl's entry point into the Oedipus complex. Freud was perplexed by femininity: both boys and girls are attached to the mother in the earliest phases of their lives, and it is clear that the boy turns away from his desire for the mother through the intervention of the father. However, if the threat of castration is not a possibility for the girl—as she finds herself already castrated—how then does she switch her allegiances to the father from the state of pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother? Freud argues that it is the realization and disappointment that the mother is castrated—and that she is responsible for the girl's castration—that causes the girl to resent the mother, whom she blames for depriving her of the penis, and then to become attached to the father. Freud defines this as the “negative” variation on the Oedipus complex. For the young girl, the father is associated with virility and authority, and she strives to be the object of his desire. For Freud, the girl's Oedipal complex does not reach a resolution like the boy's, which leads him to argue that she will ultimately have a weaker super-ego and less of a capacity for sublimation. Marked by a ‘penis-envy’ that can only be compensated for through having a male child, the ‘feminine’ position in Freud's schema is an inferior and passive one, characterized predominantly by the desire to be desired by a man and a fundamental ‘lack,’ insofar as she is always already castrated. In one instance, Freud goes so far as to describe the universal phenomenon of the Oedipus complex, shared by boys and girls alike, as a rejection of femininity.

Based on Freud's interpretation of the male and female child's socialization via the Oedipus complex, it should be abundantly clear why feminists previously found no use for psychoanalysis in their project of liberating women from the dictates of patriarchal society. In psychoanalysis, it can be argued that ‘woman’ is either mystified

as a great unknowable (e.g., a “dark continent”) or situated in an inferior position to men. Moreover, Freud devoted much more space in his writings to masculinity than femininity, which signals a privileging of the former over the latter. How, then, did psychoanalysis come to occupy such a crucial position in feminist theory and art in 1970s Britain?

Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose’s introduction to Jacques Lacan’s writings on femininity to a British audience was a major factor in the re-evaluation of psychoanalysis in feminist circles. Lacan, in his “return to Freud,” wrote and lectured much more extensively on the subject of femininity than Freud, and his re-interpretations and radicalization of Freudian doctrine became useful tools for feminists who sought to analyze and undermine the machinations of patriarchal society. Freud, however, did formulate the theoretical foundation for Lacan’s ideas, which is why delineating certain concepts that appear in Freud’s writings need to be outlined first before we understand how they were taken up by Lacan at his *école freudienne* from 1964 to 1980.

In Freud’s lecture “Femininity,” he describes how “psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> This “bisexual disposition” does not refer to the child’s sexual orientation but instead refers to the child who enters the world *psychologically* neither man nor woman. As described above, Freud does not inscribe sexual difference as merely an issue of biology but demonstrates—via the Oedipus complex—that sexed identity is fundamentally precarious and problematic. Neither natural nor given, masculine and feminine identity are not given in advance but are arrived at as a result of a *process* in which the law, drives, desire and identifications play major roles.



As Louis Althusser points out in “Freud and Lacan,” Freud “had to think his discovery and his practice in imported concepts, concepts borrowed from the thermodynamic physics then dominant, from the political economy and biology of his time.”<sup>xxxix</sup> While Freud deployed biology to lend a scientific rigor to the emergent field of psychoanalysis, he often altered the terms he used in order to give them new meanings that opposed a crude biological determinism. For example, Freud argues that human sexuality is unique insofar as it is not regulated by “instincts” (which are deemed to be pre-given and inherent) but by the “drives,” which are variable and are produced in relation to the life history of the subject. Freud imports the concept of the “drive” (*Trieb*) from biology but shifts emphasis from the natural to the cultural, insofar as drives develop through the mediation of ideas and representations (language, laws, culture, symbols) rather than being supplied by nature or traversing a pre-set biological path. As Lacan remarks, “Freudian biology has nothing to do with biology.”<sup>xl</sup> In his writings and lectures, Lacan also borrowed terms from biology and re-worked them to emphasize their symbolic or cultural dimensions instead of preserving their initial significance. For example, in the 1950s, Lacan introduces the concept of the “phallus” in distinction to the “penis.” The former is a signifier for the male genital organ and the latter is the male genital organ itself; while this distinction is not maintained in Freud’s work, Lacan contends that Freud’s analyses of the Oedipus complex and castration have more to do with the role the male genital organ plays in fantasy and psychic life (“phallus”) than biological reality (“penis”). Lacan’s account of the “phallus” can be regarded as a radicalization of Freud’s insights: Freud interprets sexual difference and castration in relation to the presence and absence of the penis, while Lacan theorizes them in linguistic

(not biological or anatomical) terms. This distinction would become important for feminist theorists and artists who regarded Lacan's concept of the phallus as a means of theorizing gendered subjectivity without recourse to biological or anatomical essentialism.

Lacan also reformulated Freud's ideas on castration, which became a valuable tool of analysis for feminist theorists and artists. For Freud, women are already castrated and men, who possess a penis, live under the threat of castration. However, in the mid-1950s, Lacan begins to theorize castration as a general condition of men *and* women—for Lacan, castration refers to the splitting of all “speaking beings,” who are alienated from immediate bodily experience through their entry into language, a world of symbols and others that mediates and regulates all relationships.<sup>xli</sup> For Lacan, the phallus operates as a master signifier whose presence and absence creates the condition of possibility for all discourse: however, no one, neither male nor female, can be said to possess or master it entirely. Even if the phallus is assumed in male privilege, it is a deception: as Lacan writes, “what might be called a man, the male speaking being, strictly disappears as an effect of discourse...by being inscribed within it solely as castration.”<sup>xlii</sup> Some feminist critics of Lacan have argued that his privileging of the phallus merely replicates Freud's patriarchal model.<sup>xliii</sup> However, Mitchell and Rose contend that Lacan's distinction between the penis and phallus provides a means of understanding sexual difference that challenges the assumed authority of the masculine subject position.

The “castration” of the subject, then, is its division, evinced in the very act of saying “I” as well as the presence of the unconscious. When a subject says “I,” Lacan argues that the “I” is split between the subject of the statement (the grammatical content

independent of the conditions of its occurrence) and the subject of enunciation (the individual act of a particular speaker at a specific time and place). Moreover, the presence of the unconscious (which Lacan defines as the “discourse of the Other”) prevents complete self-consciousness and self-mastery since our subjectivity itself is formed in relation to what lies outside it, an idea for which Lacan coined the neologism “extimacy.” As Jacqueline Rose writes in her introduction to *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*:

For Lacan, the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic processes and history, and simultaneously reveals the fictional nature of the sexual category to which every human subject is nonetheless assigned. In Lacan’s account, sexual identity operates as a law—it is something enjoined on the subject. For him, the fact that individuals must line up according to an opposition (having or not having the phallus) makes that clear. But it is the constant difficulty, or even impossibility, of that process which Lacan emphasized. Exposure of that difficulty within psychoanalysis and for feminism is, therefore, part of one and the same project.<sup>xliv</sup>

Therefore, psychoanalysis and feminism demonstrate that the position one is forced to assume—male or female—is always contingent and unstable. The task for psychoanalysis is to critique the autocracy of the ego and demonstrate the ways in which subjectivity is shot through with unconscious fantasies and motivations that cannot be completely tamed. Feminism takes the critique of self-mastery that psychoanalysis presents and applies it to patriarchal society. Its exclusions and asymmetrical power relations are often considered ‘natural’ and absolute, but feminism inspired by psychoanalysis insists on the fundamental instability of sexed identity and, consequently, the institutions that are constructed as a result of this division.<sup>xlv</sup>

The Hayward Annual Exhibition in 1978 was a major event in British art that instigated a range of critical responses and debates within feminism centered on women's exclusion from and participation in dominant arts institutions. The Hayward Annual emerged a year earlier as a forum for contemporary British art; the first show was criticized for showcasing already established artists who came primarily from a single commercial gallery, Waddington's. The following year, in what was perhaps a response to the criticisms of the first exhibition, five women—Lilian Lijn, Rita Donagh, Kim Lim, Tess Jaray, and Gillian Wise Ciobaratu—were invited to organize the second Hayward Annual. As Griselda Pollock points out in "Feminism, femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978," the proposal to have five women organize the Hayward Gallery's summer exhibition came about due to pressure on the Arts Council of Great Britain and campaigning from various groups associated with the women's movement. In exhibitions and teaching posts, women were vastly underrepresented, a condition that was railed against by organizations such as the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union as well as protesters outside the *Condition of Sculpture* show at the Hayward Gallery in 1975, an exhibition comprised of thirty-six men and four women. Considering there was an approximately equal number of men and women attending art schools in Great Britain, this asymmetry in representation was considered by many, especially artists committed to feminist politics, to be particularly galling.

Upon first glance, the granting of autonomy to women artists to organize an exhibition in a space like the Hayward Gallery would appear to be unambiguously positive: women were formerly excluded, and their inclusion in these institutional spaces signals progress towards greater equality between men and women. However, Griselda

Pollock utilizes the occasion of the acceptance of women by the dominant culture—in this instance embodied by the Arts Council and the Hayward Gallery—to pose a series of questions that are perhaps more difficult to answer but nevertheless highlight some of the ambivalence and contradictions that result when “others” are included into spaces from which they were formerly excluded. As Pollock writes, “one is tempted to ask whether the Hayward show was a real step toward the rectification of wrongs, or a strategy to enable some women to get more firmly lodged in the establishment, to use Lucy Lippard’s phrase—to get a larger slice of the rotten pie.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Central to this question is the idea that assimilating women into dominant institutions may lead to the political neutralization of feminism, which would turn away from a collective project of women’s emancipation and move towards an ethics of individual achievement and success. Moreover, if women are represented in mainstream museums and galleries, they run the risk of becoming absorbed by the art establishment and no longer exploring alternatives to what Lippard describes as the “same old system” in her introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue. As indicated above, many of the decentralizing activities of feminist artists were a result of the institutional exclusions they faced, in museums, galleries, magazines, journals, and art schools: what happens to these alternatives, then, when the art establishment opens its doors and absorbs them? Pollock does not entirely agree with Lippard’s assessment that the Hayward Annual Exhibition of 1978 scored more points for the British art establishment than the female artists who organized and participated in the show; however, she argues that raising the issue of the British art establishment’s potential exploitation of a newfound pool of fresh talent to preserve business-as-usual

while outwardly projecting a more tolerant façade is a critical problematic in understanding the stakes of women's art practice in Great Britain at the time.

In the third section of her essay, Pollock draws up a tripartite schema of the various feminisms exhibited at the Hayward Annual of 1978. The first, which she calls “cultural feminism,” is defined by its commitment to discovering alternatives to the art establishment as it currently exists, as well as loosening conventional ideas of art (fine art mediums such as painting and sculpture) and the artist. Moreover, cultural feminism is generally concerned with an explicitly female experience, signaled by a preoccupation with “physical and psychological” motifs, for example in performance and body art. The second “feminism” Pollock describes is the group from which most of the Hayward organizers were drawn. These artists are women but have no direct association with the women's movement; while they would like to see broader representation of women in arts institutions, they also do not want to be reduced to an adjective (“female”). As Pollock writes, “their work as artists is the main determinant, their sex of marginal significance in what they do, although it makes for certain admitted difficulties in opportunities, jobs, exhibitions, reputation. This is fully recognized, but is compromised by the dangers they perceive in identifying themselves first and foremost as women within a male-dominated art world.”<sup>xlvi</sup> If the first tendency is characterized by a total rejection of the male-dominated art world and the second a willingness to engage with it while suppressing the difficulties of operating as a female artist, the third tendency—of which Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly are a part—emphasizes the implications of being a woman while also highlighting the importance of critically intervening within dominant institutions. The work of Hiller and Kelly, Pollock suggests, is radical on two levels,

since it addresses some of the major political issues of feminism while also challenging the conventional mediums of art.

Even though Hiller and Kelly both participated in the Hayward Annual, Pollock argues that the significance of their work was neutralized due to the context of the show. Since the second group Pollock describes organized the exhibition, it was generally dominated by a preponderance of abstract paintings and sculpture, a privileging of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, and an avoidance of overt referentiality and social and political issues. Amongst the more conventional art exhibited at the Hayward Annual in 1978— even if made by female artists—the explicitly feminist work of Hiller and Kelly was either ignored or misunderstood, since it required such a different mode of engagement from the viewer, namely that it “demands work on the work of art” according to Pollock. Ultimately, for Pollock the Hayward Annual failed to move beyond a superficial rectification of women’s exclusion from art institutions due to its general avoidance of works foregrounding the complexities and contradictions of being a female artist in a patriarchal bourgeois society. What Pollock terms “equal rights feminism”— the movement to gain more placements for women in society’s institutions without questioning the basic organizing principles underlying them—is insufficient, since emphasis is placed on *qualities* rather than *effects*. Pollock argues that it is important to make a distinction between “women’s art” (i.e., any art made by women) and “feminist art” (i.e., art that addresses the oppression of women in patriarchal society), since the former can be much more easily co-opted by dominant institutions and art critics. Indeed, the least favorable critical reactions were directed at the explicitly feminist art in the

show, since it was these works that disrupted and challenged normative definitions of art and the role of the artist.

Pollock's description of Hiller and Kelly's work is worth quoting in full:

Their art does not attempt a fantasy solution to contemporary problems, does not see art as the means to avoid the conflicts and meanings of our society by proposing an alternative, imaginative order...[in the Hayward Annual] only Kelly and Hiller engaged with the fragmentary, the non-unitary and non-self-evident. Kelly most particularly radically displaces current ideologies of art by displacing the viewer's relation to an art object, and by demanding that the viewer work to participate in reconstructing the discourses set out in and through the artist's work. Kelly's work confronts one of the myths of patriarchy, Woman as Nature and Nurture, as Mother because of her so-called natural capacity to bear and raise children. This is the ideological basis used to discount women's artistic creativity. Kelly brings together in the gallery not only those historically separated roles, artist and mother, but also unites the public and private spheres, the domestic and professional whose categorical separation have served to maintain and define patriarchal notions of what is and is not art.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Kelly and Hiller take a negative, deconstructive approach towards their depictions of femininity, highlighting the contradictions of their own presence in a male-dominated art world and the divisions that circumscribe women in positions of inferiority in domestic and professional spheres. Nevertheless, art historian Hal Foster argues that this approach might run into certain limits if one of its major objectives is to mitigate and reform this negativity. In his introduction to *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Culture Politics*, Foster worries that Lacan's emphasis on the phallus and the Name-of-the-Father as metaphysical conditions of possibility for the production of meaning and the operation of power forecloses any possibility of change from below while disavowing the social and historical dimensions of patriarchy, which is preserved through the contingent daily



practices of everyday life. Because patriarchy is theorized in such stark absolutes in Lacanian psychoanalysis (failure to integrate the Name-of-the-Father into the symbolic order produces psychosis, for example), the art that engages with it is bound to reflect the rigid qualities of that structure. For Foster, the art that deploys Lacanian psychoanalysis is marked by a tension between “its political desire to transform social institutions and its historical pessimism regarding patriarchy... This art does indeed demonstrate that the subject is produced socially, but it is not enough to say that its patriarchal structures are thus ‘subject to change’ when no strategies for change are offered and when these structures are presented as all but transhistorical and urpsychological.”<sup>xlix</sup>

However, Foster fails to acknowledge that an engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis did not seal off artists like Mary Kelly from the realm of political organizing and direct action.<sup>1</sup> Kelly, for one, was a principal founder of the Women’s Workshop of the Artist’s Union. The Artist’s Union was initially established in May 1972 and its meetings were held at the ICA, an institution that offered its space and services to the group. Members included politically active members such as Margaret Harrison, Conrad Atkinson, Stuart Brisley, Gustav Metzger, and Kelly served as chairman [sic] for a period of time. While the Artist’s Union was formed to promote the interests of artists in relation to arts institutions and patrons, influence the course of arts programming in Great Britain, and create connections with progressive causes more generally, the female members of the group quickly sought an independent subcommittee in which their specific demands as female artists could be met, which led to the formation of the Women’s Workshop. As Elona Bennett remarked on the formation of the Women’s Workshop, “women took key positions and this took everyone by surprise.”<sup>li</sup> The

workshop functioned as a nexus in which women could discuss each other's work, plan projects, research female artists of the past, organize programs at universities and other institutions, and discover feminist artists in other contexts, especially in the U.S. Kelly embraced the women's movement and its collective goals, especially those related to move beyond the containment of the fine arts context and into alliances with women in different occupations. As the constitution of the Women's Workshop states, "the Women's Workshop has already been in contact with three situations in the Trade Union Movement which have special lessons and relevance for women; the Strike at Brannan's, the Fakenham Occupation by women and the Women Night Cleaners Campaign for unionization."<sup>lii</sup>

Kelly, as part of the Berwick Street Collective, created the experimental documentary *Nightcleaners*, which began as a fairly straightforward film advocating the cause of nightcleaners: female workers who, in addition to taking care of domestic duties that were generally not considered labor, had to also work additional night shifts cleaning offices to make ends meet. However, after years at the editing table, *Nightcleaners* became a documentary that drew on avant-garde strategies to disrupt the alleged transparency of the conventional documentary film. Indeed, the filmmakers of the Berwick Street Collective were inspired by Brecht insofar as they inserted various scenes to make the viewer aware of the status of the film as a representation rather than a mere rendering of "reality": for example, during an extended shot of a woman cleaning a toilet, the filmmakers intersperse black leader throughout the scene to interrupt the smooth continuity of filmic time while also drawing a parallel between the labor of cleaning and editing. The technique of inserting black leader into narrative sequences in the film draws

attention to the filmmaking process and the materiality of film itself, which contradicts the purported ability for documentary film to give the viewer unmediated access to an objective truth. While the Brechtian strategies of *Nightcleaners* may have gone unnoticed or may have resulted in incomprehension, the film—which toured high schools, factories, and other venues—was part of a larger campaign to help some of the most subjugated workers in Great Britain. In *Art Labor, Sex Politics*, art historian Siona Wilson describes the ways in which Kelly’s involvement in the making of *Nightcleaners* fundamentally shaped her career as an artist. Thus, it is clear that Kelly’s engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis does not shut down the possibility of direct political action but rather informs it. Indeed, the issue of sexuality, ignored so long by the Left, was brought to bear on ideology and politics by feminism, which found a critical theoretical resource in psychoanalysis for these issues.

The final artist this chapter will address is Jo Spence, whose artistic-activist work emerged as a result of her theoretical and practical engagements in various contexts, including the women’s movement, adult education, worker’s struggles, semiotics and psychoanalysis. Like Kelly, in works such as *Remodelling Photo History* and *Beyond the Family Album*, Spence aims to de-naturalize and “make strange” specific modes of perception—in particular the ways in which we look at photographs and understand photographic history—in order to present a more critical account of the way photography functions in society. *Remodelling Photo History* (Fig. 21) was made in collaboration with Terry Dennett, who she met in 1974 while working at the Children’s Rights Workshop. Dennett was a committed socialist who worked as a scientific photographer while also doing research into the use of photography in the working-class struggles of the British

left during the 1920s and 30s. *Remodelling Photo History* draws on various genres and uses of photography that were generally excluded from accounts of “fine art” photography—criminal and fashion photography, for example—to show the vast heterogeneity of “photographies” that are shaped not by any inherent property of the medium but rather by the social, political, ideological, and institutional forces that deploy them.<sup>liii</sup> Moreover, this collaborative project draws on Dennett’s experience as a scientific photographer as well as Spence’s former experience working as a portrait photographer. As Spence and Dennett demonstrate, photographs do not possess a fixed, inherent meaning: they are, in their words, “sites of struggle,” an observation that is echoed in Kelly’s “secondary revisions” or “reworkings” of ideology. As Spence and Dennett write, “we are...attempting to offer a critique of the standard histories of photography, which still mostly exclude details of institutional, state, class or economic determinants, being grounded rather in ‘great inventions,’ ‘great names,’ ‘great companies,’ and ‘great themes.’”<sup>liv</sup>

*Beyond the Family Album* (Fig. 22) was included in the *Three Perspectives on Photography* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1979. While Spence had exhibited her work before in other contexts, it was the first time she showed in a gallery. She took herself as subject, a point of entry into an examination of the ways in which the family album constructs a narrative of identity formed in relation to class and sexuality. Spence came from a working-class background, so the significance of this intersection was felt deeply by her; however, she does not submit to a purely autobiographical mode of authentic truth-telling and self-revelation. Instead, she views her own life through the lens of dramaturgy, characterizing photographs of herself as “fictions of me—as are all

photographs.” To further her point, in *Beyond the Family Album* Spence quotes Allan Sekula: “How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?”<sup>lv</sup> In framing identity as an “invention,” Spence—not unlike Kelly—argues that one’s sense of self is not a prefigured essence but rather formed under the pressure of symbolic structures and the power that finds its articulation within them. Through analyzing photographs of her own life, Spence demonstrates that the family album is a carefully constructed space in which hardships, illnesses, failed relationships, struggles and conflict are excluded. Furthermore, in taking herself as subject Spence also explores the ways in which photographs and identities are produced in a complex social space between “I” and “others.” Prompted by the discrepancy between her own experience as a child and the way she was represented photographically, Spence reflects on her experience as a commercial photographer: “There is no way I could have understood fully the implications of trying to represent other people (however well intentioned) if I had not first of all begun to explore how I had built a view of myself through other people’s representations of me.”<sup>lvi</sup> In *Remodelling Photo History* and *Beyond the Family Album*, in which Spence operates both in front of and behind the camera, there is a consistent oscillation between Spence’s highly individuated experience and the larger social, political and economic forces that shape it.

Spence did not have a typical artistic career, since she began working first as a commercial photographer before she considered pursuing other ways of approaching photography. Prior to exhibiting in an art context at the Hayward Gallery in 1979, she showed her often collaborative works in spaces devoted to political and community

organizing for the women's movement, children's rights, and working-class struggles. In 1977, she took a job as a typist at the British Film Institute, where she encountered contemporary semiotic and psychoanalytic theories in the cinema journal *Screen*. She was also the founding member of a number of groups, including the Photography Workshop, the Hackney Flashers, and the Half Moon Photography Workshop, which served as spaces in which photographers and amateurs participated in workshops, published journals (*Camerawork*), and organized events and exhibitions that operated as what Siona Wilson characterizes as "dispersed counter-institutions" to museums and galleries. Not unlike *Nightcleaners*, whose primary aim was to raise awareness for the nightcleaners' unionization campaign, many of the projects that emerged from these groups did not take as their ultimate destination the spaces of the gallery or museum. Certainly, this orientation led to a fair amount of critical dismissal of Spence's work, which can be summarized in its refusal to grant her photographic projects the status of art. However, as indicated by her projects *Remodelling Photo History* and *Beyond the Family Album*, Spence did not seek to establish a rarefied and autonomous form of photography defined by the aesthetic style of an individual camera operator: for Spence, "photography-as-art" is but one element of a larger ensemble of discursive practices that we identify as photography. Moreover, in all of her activities Spence wanted to explore the social and ideological *uses* of different forms of photography across the political spectrum, an interrogation that would be severely restricted by an exclusively aesthetic concern with the medium.

While Spence did draw on some of the major critical tools of politicized art in the 1970s (Barthesian semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis), she nevertheless regarded

“deconstruction” as an insufficient gesture, a recognition that resulted from her battle with cancer in the early 1980s as well as her political commitment to the struggles of marginalized people. As Spence writes:

If you have a problem you need strategies for solving it. Deconstructing may clear the way, but you still need strategies. I can't just proceed in a negative way. I can deconstruct orthodox medical practices, I can deconstruct the image of the doctor, but it doesn't tell me how to improve or redefine my physical health. For me that element is missing in the deconstruction model of the world. I want to be part of that area of education which encourages people to think for themselves, to understand not only the process of how the unconscious mind works, but to find out where to go for information and how to know if it is in your own or your group interests. Unless there is some notion that change is possible, then the act of destroying itself is insufficient... You are on the road once you start deconstructing, there is no doubt about that at all. But if it is only an academic exercise, with no links back into the actual needs of individuals and groups at specific times, then where are we going?<sup>lvii</sup>

As the work of both Kelly and Spence demonstrate, the critical deconstruction of gendered subjectivity does not terminate in mere abstract reflection but opens onto and subtends their political engagements. Rather than creating an analytically arbitrary divide between “art” (work exhibited in galleries) and “non-art” (political and community organizing), it is critical to view the feminist art of the 1970s as crucially informed by the contemporary social and political struggles of the decade, from which it is impossible to disentangle them. The feminist artists covered in this chapter produced interventions within the dominant institutions of art, created alternative venues for the production, distribution, and exhibition of art, and also participated in the broader campaigns of the women's movement; instead of foregrounding the autonomy or unique status of the artist and art, feminist artists in the 1970s established that *all* cultural producers must negotiate

specific social, economic and ideological conditions, an observation that would have immense importance for the development of politicized art practices in the decades to come.



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<sup>i</sup> For an overview of the relationship between feminist artistic practices and the women's movement, see *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, ed. and intro. by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1987).

<sup>ii</sup> See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review*, VII, no. 4 (July-August 1940), 296-310; Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism vol. 4*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-94.

<sup>iii</sup> In *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, art historian John Walker surveys a decade that is often regarded as a period without identity or internal coherence, since it was characterized by the proliferation of a range of movements and tendencies emerging in the wake of the decline of High Modernism. However, Walker moves beyond a pluralistic approach in arguing that "what was new and significant about art in Britain during the 1970s was its repoliticization and feminization, its attempt to reconnect to society at large... This shift to the Left provides a unitary theme." John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992), 2.

<sup>iv</sup> The feminist scholarship of Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose forged a link between Althusser's theory of ideology and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, which provided a complex understanding of the ways in which the dynamics of identity formation are bound up with the inequalities and oppressions that women face in society generally. The link between Marxism and psychoanalysis, which was also displayed in various articles in the British film journal *Screen*, became a point of departure for many feminist artistic practices in the 1970s. See Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986); Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16, Issue 3 (October 1975), 6-18.

<sup>v</sup> In the United States, Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago founded *Womanhouse*, a temporary installation and performance space that established an alternative platform for female artists who were neglected or silenced by mainstream art institutions. When *Womanhouse* opened in 1972, only women were invited to the exhibition on its first day, and the installation was characterized by forms and images related to the female body. At *Womanhouse*, Schapiro and Chicago celebrated "feminine" crafts such as weaving, embroidery, sewing, and ceramic decoration, utilizing forms that had been devalued by patriarchal society to recover and showcase the lives of important women throughout history, a project of consciousness-raising and feminist collaboration that ultimately led to the creation of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* from 1974-79. In Great Britain, the touring exhibition "Womanmagic," which contained works by Marika Tell, Monica Sjoo and Beverley Skinner, was similarly motivated by the desire to celebrate a specifically female identity, yet one that was rooted in biology and mythology rather than history. At the Socialist Feminist Conference in 1979, several women voiced their concern over essentializing feminine identity: "But in celebrating what is essentially female we may simply be reinforcing oppressive definitions of women, e.g. women as always in their

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separate sphere, or women as defining their identities exclusively, and narcissistically, through their bodies.” Elizabeth Cowie, Claire Johnston, Cora Kaplan, Mary Kelly, Jacqueline Rose, Marie Yates, “Representation versus Communication,” reprinted in *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement 1975-1980* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981), 240. For an historical account of *Womanhouse*, see Arlene Raven, “Womanhouse,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 48-66.

<sup>vi</sup> Art critic and curator Richard Cork edited “Art & Social Purpose,” the March/April 1976 issue of *Studio International*, which featured contributions from Terry Atkinson, Rosetta Brooks, Victor Burgin, Gustav Metzger, John Stezaker, Caroline Tisdall, and Stephen Willats among others. Cork also organized exhibitions of “social purpose” art and published reviews in the *Evening Standard* that emphasized the necessity for artists to address society and work to improve it. Artists in Great Britain also engaged with the work of American art critics such as Lucy Lippard (who was a champion of politicized and feminist artistic practices in America and Europe) and Linda Nochlin, whose landmark essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” explored the historical marginalization of women in the field of visual art as a symptom of unequal access to institutions. In her essay, Nochlin also debunks the mythology of “artistic genius” that runs through the discipline of Art History, arguing that (male) “Great Artists” do not possess an innate ‘genius’ but benefit from historic, economic, institutional and familial circumstances that permit their capacities and talents to be cultivated. See Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Westview Press, 1989), 145-179; Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: Plume, 1976).

<sup>vii</sup> Claire Bishop, “Incidental People: APG and Community Arts,” in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 163-193.

<sup>viii</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978,” *Feminist Review*, No. 2 (1979), 3-55.

<sup>ix</sup> John A. Walker, *Left Shift*, 212.

<sup>x</sup> Mary Kelly, “The Crisis in Professionalism,” paper presented at the conference *The State of British Art: A Debate*, ICA, London, February 10-12, 1978, organized by Peter Fuller, Andrew Brighton, Richard Cork, and John Tagg, reprinted in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 13. In 1978, *Audio Arts* published a 16-cassette recording of every presentation and discussion at the conference, which is currently available at the Tate website: <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/supplements/the-state-of-british-art>.

<sup>xi</sup> Mary Kelly, “Introduction: Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, xxiii.

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- xii “No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith,” *Parachute*, no. 26 (1982), 31-35.
- xiii “Ideology and Consciousness,” *Audio Arts*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1977. Recording available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/volume-3/number-3>.
- xiv Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism*, 18.
- xv “Alternative activities are, however, always defined in relation to that to which they are counterposed. A ‘counterculture’ does not exist absolutely outside of that to which it runs counter. The dominant and the alternative in cultural practice exist *interdependently*.” Parker and Pollock, “Feminism and Modernism,” in *Framing Feminism*, 99.
- xvi Griselda Pollock, “Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978,” 54.
- xvii “Ideology and Consciousness,” *Audio Arts*, Vol. 3, No. 3.
- xviii For a discussion of *Ten Months*, see Susan Hiller, *Thinking about Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), 47-50.
- xix Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), 105-143.
- xx Eleanor Antin also utilizes a serial display of photographs of her own body in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), which documents her weight loss over a period of thirty-seven days. In Antin’s *Carving* and Hiller’s *Ten Months*, the Minimalist grid and Conceptual Art’s bureaucratic mode of presentation, which served to create a distance between the psychology of the artist and the work itself, are imbued with a distinctly feminist subjectivity.
- xxi Susan Hiller, *Ten Months*, 1977-79. 10 b/w composite photographs, 10 texts, arranged sequentially; overall size 203 x 518 cm/80 in. x 204 in.
- xxii “Ideology and Consciousness,” *Audio Arts*.
- xxiii Kelly’s theorization of feminine subjectivity is rooted in her reading of Jacques Lacan. In 1973, Laura Mulvey and Mary Kelly founded the Lacan Women’s Study Group, which included Rosalind Delmar, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. The importance to British feminists of Lacan’s articulation of the Oedipus complex is expressed by Laura Mulvey, here in discussion with Griselda Pollock: “The Lacanian concept of the Imaginary as the pre-Oedipal phase in a child’s development, in which the physical relationship between mother and child existed in a mutually self-sufficient dyad, seemed to address the problem of women’s exclusion from the public sphere of culture

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and 'the Law'. The paternal threat of castration would initiate the child's development into subjectivity; a crisis moment out of which the physical contentment offered by the maternal body would be left behind and devalued. Out of this sense of loss, of the maternal body and the child's imaginary sense of wholeness, came the paternal principles represented in the first instance by language itself, a system that was ruled by laws and the 'Law' of the patriarchal Symbolic. As in the case of feminist responses to Freud, this relationship between a maternal 'Imaginary' and a paternal 'Symbolic' seemed to offer a means to theorise the way that the maternal, and implicitly, the feminine as such, was devalued and excluded from the world of culture, art, politics and all those things that combine to create a dynamic social system. To understand how this system was founded on an unconscious structure seemed to offer an important insight into how it worked... but, of course, without offering simple solutions for change. In the first instance, it seemed important to articulate the problem..." See "Laura Mulvey in conversation with Griselda Pollock," *Studies in the Maternal*, Vol. 2, Issues 1 & 2 (2010), 3-4. For an overview of Lacan's writings on femininity, see Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Norton, 1982).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

<sup>xxv</sup> Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, 39.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 197-269.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, intro. Lucy Lippard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—A Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 155-200.

<sup>xxix</sup> Pollock, "Screening the Seventies," 158.

<sup>xxx</sup> Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, 67.

<sup>xxxi</sup> "Ideology and Consciousness," *Audio Arts*.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, xiii.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *New Left Review*, Issue 40 (November-December 1966), 12.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction: Feminism and the Psychic," in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2005), 8.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Freud first introduced the Oedipus complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The concept would occupy a crucial position in his theorization of subjectivity and the differences between men and women. See Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinctions Between the Sexes," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, Vol. XIX (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Femininity [1933]" reprinted in *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Rosalind Minsky (London: Routledge, 1996), 218.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan," *New Left Review*, Issue 55 (May-June 1969), 52.

<sup>xl</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54*, trans. with notes by John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), 75.

<sup>xli</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits*, 575-585.

<sup>xlii</sup> Lacan, quoted in Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction-II," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, 44.

<sup>xliii</sup> For a feminist framing of Jacques Lacan, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). Psychoanalyst Karen Horney and writer Simone de Beauvoir also critique Freud's privileging of the male position, the latter in her groundbreaking *The Second Sex* (1949).

<sup>xliv</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction-II," 29.

<sup>xlv</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction: Feminism and the Psychic," in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 4.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978," 41.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

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<sup>xlix</sup> Hal Foster, "Introduction," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Culture Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), 9.

<sup>i</sup> In *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, Siona Wilson explores the relationship between Mary Kelly's artistic output and her feminist activism, with an emphasis on her role in producing *Nightcleaners* (1975) with the Berwick Street Collective. See Siona Wilson, "Nightcleaners: The Ambiguities of Activism and the Limits of Production," and "The Spectator as Reproducer: Mary Kelly's Early Films," in *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015), 1-53.

<sup>li</sup> Griselda Pollock, Interview with Elona Bennett, July 9, 1982, reprinted in *Framing Feminism*, 7.

<sup>lii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>liii</sup> In *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, historian of photography John Tagg arrives at a similar conclusion: "Photography as such has no identity. Its status as technology varies with the power relations that invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work... Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such." John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 63.

<sup>liv</sup> Terry Dennett and Jo Spence, "Remodelling Photo History: A Collaboration Between Two Photographers," in *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 118.

<sup>lv</sup> Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996* (Normal: Illinois State UP, 1999), 121.

<sup>lvi</sup> Jo Spence, "Visual Autobiography: Beyond the Family Album," in *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 83.

<sup>lvii</sup> Jo Spence, "Photo Therapy," in *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 186.

#### IV. Conrad Atkinson

In May 1978, *The Times* critic Bernard Levin penned a scathing review of *Art for Whom?*, an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London that featured the work of artists Conrad Atkinson, Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, and Stephen Willats among others. Curated by critic Richard Cork, *Art for Whom?* framed its question by presenting artists whose work operated beyond the confines of art institutions while simultaneously striving to produce political effects within these particular contexts.<sup>i</sup> As Cork argued in his role as a critic and editor of *Studio International*, art had previously been defined by medium and circumscribed by an ideology that elevated it above the contingencies of politics. Through posing the question of art's social function and the public it has served in the past and could potentially serve in the future, Cork wanted to foreground the link between art and politics. In his editorial that introduced the "Art & Social Purpose" issue of *Studio International* of March/April 1976, Cork contended that "the most important challenge facing art in the latter half of the seventies is to restore a sense of social purpose, to accept that artists cannot afford for a moment longer to operate in a vacuum of specialized discourse without considering their function in wider and more utilitarian terms."<sup>ii</sup> Cork championed artistic practices that subverted art's alleged autonomy in the name of political engagement; Levin, however, perceived what he saw at *Art for Whom?* as hostile to the very idea of art itself.

After lambasting the work of Conrad Atkinson and Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson due to its lack of recognizably artistic content—"sheets from the Family Allowances Act torn out and pasted on the wall, similarly displayed notices from the

Asbestos Information Council...an account of a campaign against the proposed closure (on economic grounds) of Bethnal Green Hospital”—Bernard Levin then launches into a diatribe against the idea that art and artists can effectively engage in direct political action. After sarcastically maintaining that Bach and Cervantes may have been involved in the political struggles of their time, Levin insists that even if they were they did not do so as artists: “I do not know that Bach ever stood as shop-steward for the Thuringia branch of the Musician’s Union, or that Cervantes campaigned actively against sexism; still, they may have done, and artists today may do even more in the same line. But as artists? As artists? How?”<sup>iii</sup> Addressing a range of artistic practices in *Art for Whom?* that opposed the idea of art as the embodiment of universal, transcendent, and trans-historical values, Levin falls back on a reactionary notion of art for art’s sake. Writing about the artists in *Art for Whom?*, Levin argues that they “do not know what art is, and have never felt its wing brush their face and in doing so given them a sudden, overwhelming glimpse of the eternal truth. What is art that it should have a sake?”<sup>iv</sup> Levin hysterically charges Atkinson, Dunn/Leeson and Willats with “poisoning the wells of art,” and his criticism of the exhibition generally echoed many conservative voices during the 1970s which considered the politicization of art to negate its status as art.<sup>v</sup>

In *Art for Whom?* Atkinson exhibited *Asbestos* (Fig. 23), a work that centered on husband and wife Henry and Mary Vaughan, the asbestos-related diseases they contracted (which resulted in the death of the former), and the absence of any form of support from the asbestos company for which Henry had worked. In the Serpentine Gallery, Atkinson arranged individual case histories, medical reports and other forms of documentation in the shape of lungs, which were surrounded by newspaper articles and



asbestos-contaminated objects in plastic bags. Atkinson's engagement with industrial diseases and the institutional failure to provide care for workers who contracted them as a result of their labors emerged out of his exhibition at the Northern Arts Gallery from the previous year, *Iron Ore*, which was also included in *Art for Whom?* by Richard Cork. *Iron Ore* consists of thirteen panels and tells the story of Billy Hunter, an iron ore miner from Atkinson's hometown of Cleator Moor who suffered from chest diseases related to his employment. In both *Asbestos* and *Iron Ore*, Atkinson examines the suffering of particular lives set against the imperatives of profit and the complex arrangements under which businesses incorporate to shield themselves from potential legal action. In the catalogue text for *Iron Ore*, Atkinson offers space to Billy Hunter to describe the conditions under which he labored: no ventilation, few safety precautions, and misleading information from his employers and doctors concerning the dangers of exposure to kidney ore. Since iron ore miners were members of the General and Municipal Workers' Union and not the National Union of Miners, they did not have access to the same protections as coal miners. Therefore, Billy Hunter was not eligible for compensation, despite the fact that he had contracted a disease as a result of working in a mine.<sup>vi</sup>

In *Art for Whom?* Atkinson explored the links between the case of Billy Hunter and Henry Vaughan, presenting their individual cases as emblematic of a broader refusal on the part of corporations to take responsibility for the dangerous conditions in which their profits were generated. As Atkinson writes in a catalogue statement from *Art for Whom?*, "the counterpoints between the iron ore miners and those suffering from asbestos-related diseases...clearly indicate that there is, for a society such as ours, an acceptable risk. In other words, this balance between human life and profit."<sup>vii</sup> The

diseases Hunter and Vaughan contracted appeared many years later, and in the case of the latter the asbestos company he had worked for no longer existed by the time his ultimately fatal condition emerged. Atkinson collaborated with Nancy Tait, secretary of the Asbestos Induced Diseases Society, to campaign for compensation for victims of asbestos poisoning, utilizing the platform of the museum to circulate information on asbestos-related diseases that countered the public relations strategies of asbestos corporations. He also invited Harold Walker, Employment Minister of the State, and John Cunningham, a Labour MP who had campaigned for iron ore miners, to the exhibition to put pressure on a commission that had been set up to address the issue of compensation for workers suffering from industrial diseases.

Atkinson researched the medical literature on asbestos exposure, discovering an article by doctors from the 1970s that drew a connection between pneumoconiosis and asbestosis.<sup>viii</sup> One of the doctors from this group of researchers also drafted a leaflet after examining iron ore miners from West Cumbria that claimed iron ore and asbestos may be contributing factors leading to cancer, mesothelioma and other chest diseases. For Atkinson, the problem was not the absence of knowledge concerning the dangers of iron ore and asbestos but the failure of corporations to acknowledge and circulate this information since it would have greatly hindered their productive capacities. Not only did the asbestos industry refuse to distribute information on the harmful effects of asbestos exposure, it also deployed resources to both conceal and counter this knowledge. “The worst thing,” Atkinson states, “was that the companies were not only ignoring such pathetic safety rules as exist, but were suing all the money and power multinationals have at their disposal to suppress, quite cynically, all the evidence through advertising, the

media, and government pressure.”<sup>ix</sup> In *Art for Whom?* Atkinson deployed art as a medium of tactical communication in the service of an immediate end, with the artist taking on an unanticipated role in pushing forward reforms to remedy the problems addressed in the exhibition.

The negative reactions to Conrad Atkinson tend to emphasize that his work does not resemble art, nor does he occupy the role of a conventional artist. His art often consists of documentation that is arranged to create critical juxtapositions between abstract forces driven by those in power and the negative impacts they have on the most vulnerable people in our society, and his consequential engagements with working-class political struggles bring him closer to an activist reporter battling media bias than an artist merely confronting stylistic or formal problems. Clearly, Levin frames Atkinson’s work as a debasement of the aims of art, if art is intended to lift viewers out of the determinations of history, society and ideology into a superior realm of “eternal truth.” However, many critics and artists in the 1970s and beyond come to quite a similar conclusion as Levin—is Atkinson making art? Can he be called an artist?—yet with an entirely different assessment of his work, framing what Levin can only view negatively as a positive development that expands the range of what is possible for artists practically, conceptually, and, for critics like Lucy Lippard, even formally: she even credits him with discovering a new art form, the “single issue show,” one which proved generative for artists addressing sociopolitical issues.<sup>x</sup> Like many of the artistic practices in the 1970s that attempted to diminish the supposed gulf between art and politics, Atkinson’s exhibitions blur the boundaries and categories that had previously determined what artists could be and do, inciting reactionary voices to lament the loss of an

autonomous realm of aesthetic contemplation. However, as Atkinson points out, this alleged autonomy has always been fictive and is itself shot through with politics: “if art remains unpoliticized by the artist,” states Atkinson at a conference in London on “Art and Politics” in 1977, “then it will be politicized, by being depoliticized, by the system producing and supporting it.”<sup>xi</sup>

For Atkinson, art is always already political, whether or not the artist makes a conscious decision to make “political” work. In the same lecture, contained on *Audio Arts* Vol. 3 No. 3, Atkinson opens with a newspaper story from the *Evening Standard* that describes the events surrounding the kidnapping of a Tory MP (who also happens to be an Earl) in southern Ireland. Friends and family members who were interviewed for the article are genuinely confused as to why the Tory politician was kidnapped since they all describe him as “non-political,” despite his role as a conservative politician and being a beneficiary of Britain’s stratified class system. Atkinson begins his lecture with this story to get a few laughs from the audience, but also to cunningly demonstrate the manner in which ideology operates: the status quo—which is inherently conservative and functions to stem the tide of progress and change—is regarded as neutral, natural and non-political, while any actions that contest its entrenched dominance are viewed with suspicion as partisan and threatening. In the domain of art, Atkinson’s exhibitions were met with negative criticism on these very grounds. As Atkinson writes in the introduction to *Picturing the System*, “it was soon made clear to me in a number of ways that [the] intentions and subjects [in my work] were not considered a suitable area for artists... The least of the criticisms was that they were ‘boring,’ the most severe that they were ‘political’ in a way in which portraits of businessmen or English country homes were

not.”<sup>xii</sup> Through a type of quantitative logic, certain critics believe that artistic practices tackling sociopolitical issues contain a greater amount of politics than abstract paintings or beautiful landscapes. However, as Atkinson insists, all artists are producers of meanings that inform our ideas of what “culture” is; therefore, even the most “non-political” art can be mobilized to support the reigning ideology of a particular system.

If artists are “cultural producers” as Atkinson argues, then art, regardless of its allegiances, cannot escape the symbolic matrix of political meanings: “the idea of political art seems a little artificial, in the sense that one can hardly avoid politics if one is involved in art.”<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, artists are presented with a choice: either suppress the imbricated relationship between art and politics, or bring it to the forefront of their work. In his exhibitions that generally address the deleterious effects of capitalism and state-mandated violence against precarious communities, Atkinson clearly chooses the second path. According to Atkinson, dominant ideology naturalizes the status quo and “render[s] the system of controls invisible. In this situation the artist who opposes even aspects of his or her society has little choice but to attempt to render the system of controls visible for analysis.”<sup>xiv</sup> Art, then, becomes a form of exposure and communication in Atkinson’s hands, one that lays bare the structural bases of society’s repressions and inequalities. Rather than retreating into a specialized domain of aesthetic preoccupations, Atkinson wields art as a tool with which to pierce the representations provided by the cultural arms of capitalist industry—television, advertising, mass media and art—that are specifically designed to manufacture consent. His exhibitions utilize the museum as a platform through which counter-information can be disseminated. As art critic Donald Kuspit writes, “The obscene element—the sense of literally going behind the scenes—is crucial

to Atkinson, who in a sense moved back page information upfront, a rebellious artistic act in itself in our media-focused consciousness. Paradoxically, by so manipulating public, but not particularly played up information, Atkinson reveals its private side, making this so forcefully apparent that one—‘anyone at all’—cannot help but ask why the information was relegated to the back pages in the first place.”<sup>xv</sup> The museum, rather than a neutral sanctuary sheltered from ideological conflicts, is reclaimed by Atkinson as a space through which critical publicity can issue forth and oppositional counter-publics might be formed.

Atkinson uses the term “cultural producer” to describe his activities since the role of the artist carries with it a certain ideological baggage: in short, the artist has come to be understood as an exceptional person who possesses singular creative capacities: “I am always arguing against that notion of the artist as being a nonmaterial, philanthropic, disinterested, individual force in the service of the reigning ideology or its opposition.”<sup>xvi</sup> In his lectures and writings, Atkinson criticizes the “specialization” of the artist as either an “unthinking [producer] of luxury goods” or a critical intellectual marked by objective detachment. His activities involve a different orientation, in which he becomes enmeshed in the struggles of his subjects, listening to and learning from them. Collaboration with the groups and individuals he features in his works is paramount, since it is through collaboration that he circumvents a purely subjective approach.

While Atkinson abrogates the traditional role of the artist, he does not attempt to abandon ‘art’ altogether—as if such a move is feasible for a person that still exhibits in galleries and museums—but critically examines the position the artist occupies within art institutions specifically and society more generally. It is important to view his gesture as

one of recalibration and redefinition and not mere negation. As artists in the 1960s and 1970s were occupied with a rigorous critique of autonomous aesthetics and a reconsideration of the capacities of the artist, far too much ink was spilled on arguments rooted in a simplistic binary: either artists were producing art or not. In so doing, critics who engaged in debate on this terrain could neither perceive the positive contributions that were being made to artistic practice nor the reality that the idea of an autonomous realm of aesthetic contemplation was itself a historical formation that was in the process of being dissolved as a result of sustained critiques rooted in analyses of race, class and gender. In bringing together art and political commitment, Atkinson returns to a model of the artist that had been erased from the historical account by the ascendancy of a hegemonic Greenbergian modernism, itself powered by the economic dominance of the New York art world internationally.<sup>xvii</sup>

As Raymond Williams points out (and Atkinson is fond of quoting), the idea that one had to choose between “attention to natural beauty and attention to government,” that one had the option of being either “a poet or sociologist,” begins to emerge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xviii</sup> Indeed, by the early 1960s, the requirement that art should renounce the political field had become the prevailing *doxa* of art, which was not so much the fulfillment of art’s true purpose as the severe contraction of the artist’s role in society. The exclusion of politics from art was not merely a formalist purge, however: increasing business sponsorship of the arts—whether in the form of the direct financing of arts institutions or more complicated arrangements between the state and business—produced a situation in which art was expected to remain silent on sociopolitical issues.<sup>xix</sup> A postcard Atkinson circulated in the early 1980s distills the matter pithily. On two

upturned hands placed side by side the following words are written: “Who said ‘Art & Politics don’t mix’? Well, it must have been ITT, IBM, GE, Exxon, GM, MGM, CBS, BBC, ICI, CIA Distillers or the A.C.G.B...Because it certainly wasn’t Charlie Chaplin, William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Robeson, Lillian Hellman, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Lenny Bruce, Billie Holiday, Isadora Duncan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henrik Ibsen, Henri David Thoreau or Conrad Atkinson.”<sup>xx</sup> (*Fig. 24*) In linking his own practice to various precedents who created a rapprochement between art and politics, Atkinson recovers a dimension of artistic activity that had been repressed by the critical dominance of High Modernism and the demands of multinational corporations.

Both in London and across the Atlantic in New York City, Atkinson’s recovery of the link between art and politics served as a model for progressive artists and critics who wanted to reformulate art and artists’ relationship to institutions and publics. Tim Rollins, founding member of New York City artist collective Group Material and lead organizer of Kids of Survival (K.O.S.), found an inspiration in Atkinson, opening a letter to him from 1981 with a bold assertion: “I am fully convinced. You are not an artist.”<sup>xxi</sup> It would appear at first that Rollins falls into the same semantic hairsplitting that befell the reactionary critics noted above. However, if Levin disparaged Atkinson and the other artists in *Art for Whom?* for not comprehending the true nature of art—and, by extension, not truly being artists—Rollins inverts his charge, transforming Levin’s hysterical handwringing into commendation: in Rollins’ eyes, to not be an artist is more of a liberation than a marginalization. To be an artist, Rollins argues, is undesirable, since the role he or she occupies is marked by social neutralization and political disempowerment:



“To be transformed from simply an active, vocal individual into The Artist has become a serious and subtle act of social debilitation. We trip all over the famous attendant aura. Think about how much of our activity is fetishized, caricatured, even determined by the role. The scope of art, once so socially vital and wide, has been systematically reduced to a succession of personality cults, especially since the Second World War.”<sup>xxii</sup> The “succession of personality cults” that emerges in the wake of World War II to which Rollins refers also resulted in part from the absorption of avant-garde art by the mass media, especially evident in America and specifically in New York City.<sup>xxiii</sup> In situating art within the terrain of cultural activism, Atkinson pushed back against the prescribed role of the artist inherited from a hegemonic New York art world.

Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol both had considerable media presences (Pollock appeared in *Life* magazine and his paintings served as backdrops in *Vogue*; Warhol’s courting of popular culture and mass media is an indispensable component of his art); moreover, the rise of the commercial gallery system and a culture of private collecting in New York City created the conditions for an image of the artist as an individual bearing a signature trademark whose activities became increasingly circumscribed by art’s commodity status.<sup>xxiv</sup> Even if Pollock and Warhol redefined what could be accepted as art (Pollock “destroyed” easel painting; Warhol collapsed the distinction between high and low forms), they both did so within a framework in which the broader social aims of the historical avant-garde and art in the “committed” mode had been liquidated. In his letter, Rollins laments the loss of art’s social import in the decades following World War II but still views Atkinson’s work as a critical practice that can

encourage challenges to art's commodity status and reevaluations of its potential role in political life.

Atkinson's work emerged in the early 1970s out of a very different social and economic situation; the commercial gallery system in London was not as expansive as it was in New York and most funding opportunities for artists came from the Arts Council, which was overseen by the British government.<sup>xxv</sup> Furthermore, Lucy Lippard observed that socio-political cultural practices were more feasible in Great Britain than in America due to the fact that there were left-wing movements and parties with which British artists could collaborate.<sup>xxvi</sup> In 1972, Atkinson made *Strike at Brannans* (Fig. 25) with female workers at a thermometer factory in his hometown of Cleator Moor, helping to circulate information on their unionization campaign and forming the context for a meeting between the London night-cleaners campaign and the Brannans factory workers; Atkinson also returned to his birthplace to create *Iron Ore*, which addressed the failure of mining corporations to compensate workers for the industrial diseases they contracted while laboring underground in harmful conditions. Atkinson's aim in drawing attention to socio-political issues was not simply to introduce them into new contexts of display—galleries and museums—but to create the grounds for social action through altering the course of British domestic policy. For Atkinson, it is not simply a matter of bringing what lies outside art institutions inside but rather treating spaces that display art as sites that have the potential to make political issues visible that would otherwise be neglected. As Atkinson states in an interview with Charlotte Townsend-Gault in *Parachute* from 1985, "I think the gallery can be used as a center of intellectual discourse as well as for communication within cultural production."<sup>xxvii</sup> His shows received a significant amount

of publicity via circulating daily and weekly papers in London, even if some of that attention was negative, leading Lippard to describe him as a “skillful media strategist.” Furthermore, he often invited members of Parliament and other figures within the British government to view his exhibitions and also facilitated discussions between them and members of the groups that served as the basis of his works. Due to the context in which he was working and his political allegiances, Conrad Atkinson developed a very different concept of “publicity” than the promotional logic that emerged in New York City with Seth Siegelaub and the stable of Conceptual artists he represented, an issue which I will explore below.

Indeed, with *Strike at Brannans* Atkinson turned away from the international dominance of styles emerging from the New York art world, producing a politically committed form of conceptual art that foregrounded a local specificity that was based in his own biography, as he came from a working-class background. Prior to *Strike at Brannans* Atkinson made expressionist paintings in the style of Kandinsky and Pollock, exhibiting works addressing nuclear devastation and other political themes on Bond Street. His cannibalization of European and American avant-garde styles to produce paintings for commercial galleries involved an estrangement from his own history, and Atkinson could not settle there: “I had this great feeling of having been drawn out of my community, since the work I had been doing up until then wasn’t concerned with it.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Therefore, abandoning painting was a critical moment of artistic rejuvenation for Atkinson, who returned to his community at the very moment he established the research-based, politically engaged methodology that would define his career as an artist.

The vital connection he had with towns such as Cleator Moor and the history of North England as it was ravaged by industrialization set him apart from other ‘ethnographic’ or ‘anthropological’ artistic practices in the 1970s that aimed to connect with ‘other’ audiences, social movements, or an overly vague idea of community.<sup>xxix</sup> As Atkinson remarks, when he made *Strike at Brannans* he knew most of the people involved in the strike: “I had been to school with many of them, so they trusted me. I would have been an object of suspicion if I’d come in without being rooted in the community, knowing all the personalities and the issues.”<sup>xxx</sup> Rather than being “parachuted into a community,” Atkinson was already a part of it, which made his participation less of an unwelcome intrusion of “art” into a particular context, a situation that has become all-too-familiar in contemporary art. Lippard distinguishes Atkinson from other “social-purpose” art in the 1970s and 1980s by stressing his concrete alliances: “[F]or all the wishful thinking on both sides of the Atlantic about interaction with ‘the community’ and social movements and ‘broader audiences,’ Atkinson is one of the few artists who had connections (in his case with trade unions, with the Irish, with the Labour Left) and used them.”<sup>xxxi</sup> When compared with the utopian political musings of a figure such as Joseph Beuys—who enjoyed celebrity status in London and throughout Europe in the 1970s—it is clear that Atkinson positions material relations and tangible realities over idealistic abstractions, creating works that intervene in specific manifestations of power and the relationships they engender.

In his open letter to Atkinson, Timothy Rollins commends him on this dimension of his work: “you avoid the first pitfall of ideology straight away: the over-abstraction. You aren’t interested in Humanity. You are interested in a poisoned asbestos worker

named Henry Vaughan.<sup>xxxii</sup> For Rollins, Atkinson's work demonstrates the potential of art to serve as a tactical form of communication that can both mediate and counteract an increasingly complex and grim reality marked by the suppression of the powerless by the powerful, lending a political agency to artists that had been abolished by the ways in which art was understood to operate in society. Echoing Bertolt Brecht, Atkinson himself regards his cultural practice as a means by which to figure forth the "powerful intangibles [that] so profoundly affect all our lives."<sup>xxxiii</sup> As Brecht himself understood, this task must go beyond a simple representation of 'reality' and utilize the strategies of montage and collage to activate within the viewer a sense of the interconnectedness between the seemingly disparate threads of contemporary life, which Atkinson conveyed through his multi-part exhibitions and active participation in the issues he covered.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Since there was less of a chance for artists in London to attain a meteoric rise to celebrity via sales within commercial galleries, many of them set their sights on reforming channels of public funding (through organizations such as the Policy Group and the Artists' Union) and utilizing art institutions as platforms to disseminate information on contemporary events that would otherwise receive inadequate coverage. Atkinson was a crucial figure in this transformation of the visual arts in Britain, and his work served as an inspiration for artists not only in London but also across the Atlantic who wanted to recover the political mission of radical art: to contest the representations of dominant ideology. When Atkinson debuted in New York City at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1979 with *Material*, a collection of his works from 1975-1979, the title of his show inspired the name of Rollins' own collective Group Material, whose members included Doug Ashford, Julie Ault and Mundy McLoughlin.<sup>xxxv</sup> Furthermore, Atkinson's

mobilization of contemporary events to produce an art of direct political action informed the New York City artists' collective PAD/D or Political Art Documentation and Distribution (1980-1986), whose stated mission was "to provide artists with an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system."<sup>xxxvi</sup> During his visit to New York on the occasion of *Material*, Atkinson addressed the Marxist Caucus, a group of artists including Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Carl Andre, Joseph Kosuth, Rollins and others. At the event Atkinson was received with admiration and Group Material presented him with a chalice covered in stars and stripes, which served as a lighthearted acknowledgement of his activities abroad and their influence in New York. While Atkinson dispensed with debates and issues not related to his immediate environment and social class, his activities in London and the North of England nevertheless produced a sphere of influence that extended far beyond these contexts. For Atkinson, a representation of the 'social totality'—which is what his work ultimately strives for—can only be arrived through the particular; this approach does not restrict its influence but amplifies it, for it offers a way for other artists to apply this logic to what immediately surrounds them, as collectives such as Group Material, PAD/D, and ACT-UP did.

Atkinson was born in 1940 in the working-class mining village of Cumbria in the North of England. He trained as a painter first at the Liverpool College of Art for a year, to which he commuted 30 miles to attend courses. He subsequently left Liverpool in 1962 to go to the Royal Academy in London, where he quickly perceived a class divide: middle class students were encouraged to pursue painting and sculpture—the fine arts—

while the few working-class attendees were told to pursue applied arts such as illustration and design. Ignoring the advice of his superiors, he pursued painting, graduating from the Academy with a degree in 1965. The context Atkinson encountered as he left the Royal Academy was far from ideal. There was no policy of public collecting by the British government (as there was in other countries such as Holland, for example) and the Arts Council purchased works directly from commercial galleries. However, the commercial gallery system could not support the number of students graduating from art schools, which led many of them to abandon making art altogether. The first chairman of the Arts Council was John Maynard Keynes, who wanted to secure funding for art during the mid-1940s despite the dire economic circumstances that Great Britain found itself in following World War II.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, by the late 1960s the Arts Council simply had not kept pace with stylistic and technological developments in the arts: tellingly, there was no funding available for video or performance artists. Prodded to recognize its conservatism through the pressure of artists and critics, the Arts Council set up a New Activities Committee and also funded an exhibition of contemporary British art at Alexandra Palace in 1971 called *Art Spectrum*, to which Atkinson contributed a film and performance about the Conservative government's Industrial Relations Bill, whose passage led to protests in London estimated at 100,000 people.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The critical response to *Art Spectrum* was ambivalent simply because it had no other organizing principle except to showcase the diverse range of art being made in London at the beginning of the 1970s, a decade that would come to be marked by pluralism and the loss of unifying attitudes and practices.<sup>xxxix</sup> The exhibition consisted not only of visual art but musical and theatrical performances, with experimental films

presented as well; over one hundred male and twenty female artists participated, including Derek Boshier, David Hockney, Kay Fido Hunt, John Latham, Su Braden, Gustav Metzger, Victor Pasmore, and John Stezaker. However, what the exhibition lacked in curatorial impact it made up for in the critical awareness it brought about amongst artists concerning their institutional standing and the material problems they faced.

Recalling that moment, Atkinson briefly touches on his contribution to the show but moves on quickly to focus on the consequences of having over one hundred artists meeting in bars for weeks. Both during and following the exhibition, many artists began to conceive of ways to improve the conditions in which they worked through collective action, leading to the formation of various groups that would ultimately result in the establishment of the Artists' Union in 1972.<sup>xi</sup> Members of the Artists' Union included Margaret Harrison (Atkinson's partner), Stuart Brisley, Marc Chaimowicz, Kay Fido Hunt, Carol Kenna (who served as the organization's first secretary along with Harrison), Gustav Metzger and Mary Kelly. The Artists' Union recruited 120 members outside of *The New Art* show at the Hayward Gallery, and its membership reached 400 at its height. The *Art Spectrum* show's disproportionate ratio of male to female participating artists made the latter aware of the distinct disadvantages they faced, which informed feminist criticism of jury selection processes and motivated female artists to create alternative infrastructures for themselves in the form of alternative spaces, exhibitions and publications. As Margaret Harrison remarked, the exhibition brought to light the "shared problems concerning minimal survival and the inevitable competition for limited funds, with women artists in a particularly vulnerable position."<sup>xli</sup> Lastly, critics, curators and



dealers dominated the selection panel of Art Spectrum, with only one artist serving on it. Ultimately, Art Spectrum made manifest the extent to which artists lacked control over how their work was exhibited and how they were compensated if presented with such an opportunity, which led the Artists' Union and many other groups and individuals with similar goals to interrogate the artist's position within the institutional structures of art and fight for greater authority within these spaces.

As is well known, the events of May 1968 caused a series of upheavals throughout the world; in London, May 1968 prompted many artists to begin questioning Arts Council policy in order to reform it and resulted in the occupation of art schools in Guildford, Croydon, Birmingham and Hornsey (Atkinson himself participated in the sit-in at Hornsey).<sup>xliii</sup> It is within this politically charged climate that he presented his first solo exhibition, *Strike at Brannans*, at the ICA in London in 1972. Invited to exhibit at the ICA on the basis of his reputation as a painter by director David Thompson, Atkinson responded that he had stopped painting and was primarily interested in a strike that was happening in his hometown of Cleator Moor, where the unemployment rate was measured at double the national average. The primarily female workforce of the thermometer factory there was striking not only to receive comparable wages to the male employees at Brannans—they were paid only 70 percent of the rate for men—but also over the conditions in which they worked: dangerous levels of mercury exposure were an occupational hazard that was left unacknowledged by management. The timing of *Strike at Brannans* was planned by Atkinson to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the strike. He travelled to Cleator Moor in the months leading up to the exhibition to do research, talk to the workforce, and attend strike committee meetings to determine how

he would frame the event at the ICA. In *Strike at Brannans*, Atkinson foregrounded the strikers' own materials, assembling case histories, letters, wage slips, their photographs and super-8 films, and a diary kept by Muriel Hillon, a member of the committee leading the strike. He also created a short video to accompany the materials provided by the workers, since video was a cheap and easy means by which to document their perspectives and convey them to the public. The strikers faced a considerable obstacle in disseminating information on the conflict between the workers and management since the owner of the factory, Brannan, had undue influence over how it was represented in local newspapers and television. In bringing a labor struggle from the remote town of Cleator Moor to London, Atkinson hoped to circulate counter-information that would loosen Brannan's grip on the narrative of the strike.<sup>xliii</sup>

Atkinson utilized the Arts Council grant he received for *Strike at Brannans* to bring two strikers down to London and he also invited a minister and a local MP, John Cunningham, in for discussions. Atkinson also produced a print that contained the strikers' signatures overlaid on the Brannans factory license in order to raise money for the strike fund, with collections being made throughout the exhibition and at the meetings. Brannan himself arrived at an ICA meeting for twenty minutes. According to an article in *The Times Diary*, he charged an extortionate sum for his appearance, for which he was roundly lampooned by the publication. Throughout the strike, Brannan had threatened to move from Cleator Moor and establish his entire operation at his London factory. However, once Atkinson visited the factory and shared photographs he took of it with the strikers, they recognized that Brannan could not possibly maintain the same levels of production with the inadequate facilities he had in London. The two strikers

from Cleator Moor who travelled to London met with workers from the factory there, leading to that factory's unionization, which made it impossible for Brannan's threat to stand.

The most important issue for the workers, as Atkinson had discussed with them, was the extent to which the owners' profit motive overrode concerns about their health. *Strike at Brannans* is filled with documents of sickness and cynical indifference from management. As Atkinson states in an interview, "at one point Brannan's son was told of a case of mercury poisoning and his joking response was that the mercury recovered from the victim's system should be returned to the factory."<sup>xliv</sup> Unfortunately, despite bringing greater attention to the female workforce of a thermometer factory in a remote town in the North of England, *Strike at Brannans* could not help the strikers achieve their goals. By the end of a year of picketing, nearly three-quarters of the workforce was still out and their strike pay was diminishing. Some of the strikers went back to work at the factory, which meant that they had to leave the union; others, including Muriel Hillon, were dispersed and could not get jobs in the area.

If evaluated exclusively in terms of the concrete goals of the strikers, Atkinson's work may be considered by some to be a failure: the exhibition itself, the events organized around it, and the publicity from articles reporting on the show could not bring about the results the workers in Cleator Moor and Atkinson wanted. However, the Brannans London factory in Forest Hill did become completely unionized in the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers after seeing *Strike at Brannans*, even if this effort would have helped the strikers in Cleator Moor greatly had it occurred sooner. Also, it is important to evaluate *Strike at Brannans* as both a political and artistic

intervention, with the work destabilizing both terms in the process. As Atkinson writes:

“Where Strike was concerned I was determined that it should be an effective action in the world of politics and trade unions. But I also wanted it to be an effective political intervention in culture. The strikers were engaged in a political struggle, but the cultural struggle was equally important for me.”<sup>xlv</sup> On the first count, Strike at Brannans did not succeed. However, it did manage to present a model of the artist that opposed the reigning ideology of art and what it dictated for artists themselves. Instead of a disinterested figure who distills his or her subjectivity and perceptions into a saleable object that could be presented in a gallery or museum, Atkinson demonstrated that artists could actively intervene in concrete situations if they cast aside certain imperatives: to work alone in a studio, to create singular and unique objects for the art market, to occupy a position above politics. Muriel Hillon remarked in a Guardian article from August 1972 that the strike failed because the factories in the West Cumberland area were scattered and there was not enough coordination among industrial workers and not nearly enough circulation of information about the strike by the umbrella organization of the AUEW. It is within this context that Atkinson transformed what was considered possible for artists by renouncing his paintings and adopting a role that resembled a union organizer, all the while not abandoning his capacity as an artist to arrange materials to produce communicable meaning. As Lucy Lippard writes of *Strike at Brannans*, “a political void had been filled, unexpectedly, by art.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

In “The Continuing Education of a Public Artist,” Lippard credits Atkinson with providing the basis for a new art form: “the single issue show as a work in itself.” The single-issue show, Lippard argues, focuses an event or situation in order to enhance its

impact, which she compares to the way in which murals relate to public spaces and the people that inhabit them. For Lippard, the single-issue show is privileged over single-issue works, insofar as the latter will be perceived as isolated objects produced by an individual. In assembling various media and materials in collaboration with the subjects with whom he works, Atkinson suppresses his authorial voice to bring the contrapuntal activity of the sources he deploys to the forefront of his exhibitions. While Atkinson's work bears a relationship to conceptual art's emphasis on purging the visual from art and replacing the act of seeing with reading text, the inspiration for what Lippard describes as his "conceptual collage" is rooted in his trip to Cuba in 1972. In Cuba, he saw bulletin boards posted outside local buildings that housed local branches of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. These bulletin boards contained posters, photographs, notices, and letters, which were perceived by Atkinson as didactic exhibitions in their own right. While not part of an art context, the CDR's strategy of communicating an idea or theme through the juxtaposition of various media proved to be a valuable insight for Atkinson, who utilized this technique in his exhibitions as a means to urge viewers to draw connections among the disparate materials he chose to display.

According to Lippard, collage is a crucial component of Atkinson's practice, both in a material and conceptual register (collaboration, Lippard contends, is also a form of 'collage'). In the early twentieth century, collage emerged in Synthetic Cubism and in the art of the historical avant-garde. Artists working in the ranks of Dada and Surrealism utilized the technique to destabilize habituated modes of perception, with the cutting apart and reassembling of visual elements functioning as a way to bring together incongruent materials to create unanticipated meanings. Dada collage, in the work of

Raoul Hausmann for example, fragmented and pulverized the sense in images and words to produce a cacophonous assault on the viewer that scrambled the coherence of meaning itself; Surrealist collage, inspired by Comte de Lautréamont's description of a "chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella," juxtaposed unlike visions that were intended to produce an unnerving rumbling of the unconscious in the viewer. Atkinson is aware of these traditions but claims a certain distance from them: "You could pick up a bus ticket, and unlike Schwitters you wouldn't say 'How beautiful this is, how can it coordinate with these other things, this nice pink here or that shape there...' You'd say, What does it mean? What does it mean to an old-age pensioner? What does it mean in terms of transport? What does it mean in terms of cost per mile?"<sup>xlvii</sup> Certainly, Atkinson utilizes collage towards different ends, insofar as he strives for a general intelligibility over formal novelty, subjective estrangement or sensory confusion. Yet what he shares in common with the historic avant-garde's deployment of collage is the desire—which has to be understood as a political desire—to reconfigure and recontextualize the materials of everyday life in order to produce an alternative understanding of them. As Lippard writes, collage is "a fundamentally political approach, ideally suited to a dialectical vision. In the broad sense, collage transcends the notion of 'something glued' to become a way of seeing what's become unglued, and of putting the parts together again in a different way."<sup>xlviii</sup> In Atkinson's work, collage functions to cut through the veil of ideology that naturalizes the status quo as the only available possibility for society; his exhibitions present, in differentiated displays, content that remains either hidden or obscured by the conventional channels of representation in

contemporary society (television, advertising, newspapers), thereby working against a dominant ideology that would have “the-way-things-are” remain as such.

*Strike at Brannans* was Atkinson’s first “single issue show,” and the relationship it foregrounded between female labor and capitalist exploitation served as a model for *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975* (Fig. 26), an exhibition that centered on the female employees of a metal box factory in Bermondsey created by Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt and Mary Kelly. Not unlike Atkinson’s intention to have *Strike at Brannans* open at the ICA on the anniversary of the beginning of the strike at the thermometer factory, *Women and Work* was exhibited at the South London Art Gallery in the midst of the implementation of the Equal Pay Act, a bill that had been passed in 1970 which prohibited any imbalances in pay or conditions of employment between men and women. Over 150 employees of the metal box factory employees participated in the research Harrison, Hunt and Kelly carried out over two years, and the former’s photographs are included in the exhibition. *Women and Work* both reiterates and subverts conceptual art’s “aesthetics of administration”: the exhibition consists of archival materials yet the portrait photographs of the employees, which are accompanied by their names, are distant from the neutral and analytic presentational mode of conceptual art. As Julia Bryan-Wilson writes, “It is a multiracial group, diverse in age and stylistic inclination. Not all the women look right at the camera, and not all smile, but many do—most do. With their warm, frank faces, they convey dignity as well as openness toward the artists who are photographing them. The portraits propel the installation beyond reportage about aggregate, anonymous lives, strategically marshaling photography to provide a further, emotive, record.”<sup>xlix</sup> The photographs ensure that

*Women and Work* does not remain at an abstract level of generality; in an exhibition marked by an overwhelming surplus of information, this contact between worker and viewer via the photograph creates the conditions for identification and absorption, a further incentive for the viewer to understand the forces impacting these particular lives.

Indeed, *Women and Work* emerged out of a sense of transversal identification on the part of the artists who produced it: Harrison, Hunt and Kelly were members of the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, and one of the stated goals of the group was to "seek links with relevant trade unions and anti-discrimination campaigns."<sup>1</sup> The Artists' Union organized in order to renegotiate the artist's position in art institutions—pushing for more control over the conditions of exhibiting and adequate compensation for work performed—and to put forth reforms that made funding more transparent and less subject to the demands of corporate or state bureaucracy. However, the Artists' Union and the Women's Workshop in London also sought to create relationships with situations and workers beyond the immediate art context. Artists felt the need to unionize in order to protect their rights just as industrial workers had to collectively organize in order to diminish the capacities of capital to exploit their labor. In the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union and *Women and Work*, Harrison, Hunt and Kelly set up a bridge between two realms of labor that are generally regarded as divergent—manual and intellectual (or artistic)—to foreground the general disadvantages that women face in the workplace. It is not so much an equivalence as a resonance, since Harrison, Hunt and Kelly do not naively conflate the industrial labor performed at the metal box factory and their work as artists: instead, a more subtle parallel is drawn that preserves the particulars of embodied work while creating the grounds for potential allegiances and identifications across



different domains of female labor. As a report from the Women's Workshop states, "The Women's Workshop maintains that women in whatever sector they are employed are largely unorganized and consequently receive the lowest pay and work in the worst conditions; it is our intention to support our sisters in their struggle for unionization and also in the action they take as organized workers."<sup>li</sup>

In Hunt's case, the connection between the female workforce of the factory in Bermondsey and herself was personal: her mother and aunts had all worked in South London factories. Moreover, Kelly became pregnant during the project, which led her to examine the difficulties encountered by the female workforce in juggling demanding shift work while also trying to raise children. Domestic labor was a form of work that was not institutionally recognized as such: therefore, when the Equal Pay Act was passed, corporate managers figured out ways to restructure the work-day in order to make it nearly impossible for women to work while also caring for children. At the metal box factory, part-time work—which was traditionally the domain of married women—was phased out and replaced with double-shifts.<sup>lii</sup> In her article on Mary Kelly in *Studio International*, Jane Kelly observed that "[Women and Work] documented a labour force on its way out, showing the way in which industry copes with problematic, liberal legislation by either restructuring or ignoring its stipulations."<sup>liii</sup> Ultimately, the Equal Pay Act did not rectify gender imbalances in the workplace but created the conditions for capitalism to reconstitute itself in order to preserve the same inequalities.

As with Atkinson's practice—whose *Strike at Brannans* Harrison cited as a notable precedent for *Women and Work*—Harrison, Hunt and Kelly's contact with the factory workers took the form of an active and thorough immersion in their activities and

routines over the course of two years. The female employees attended the opening of the exhibition: their response to it was positive, but once reviews began circulating of the show Harrison, Hunt and Kelly were banned from the factory by the all-male management. *Women and Work* contains black-and-white photographs, audiotapes, films, text, and various documents, a diverse display that demands a sustained engagement on the part of the viewer but one that repeats a coherent message throughout: women are consistently subjected to forms of monotonous work that are fragmented and repetitive while men are granted superior supervisory roles. Photographs of hands at work are accompanied by texts that indicate the different types of labor performed by men and women at the factory: the two silent films in *Women and Work* are presented side-by-side, showing women wiping down boxes while men sit at desks rifling through paperwork. Harrison, Hunt and Kelly also recorded interviews with the female workers of the Bermondsey factory that highlight the gendered wage gap, even if such conditions were supposed to be dismantled through the passage of the Equal Pay Act. This view from below is reinforced by the statements of a male manager, who describes the lack of safety precautions taken to shield the employees from dangerous conditions in the workplace. Various forms of textual documentation supplement the visual material compiled by Harrison, Hunt and Kelly: binders atop the listening stations in *Women and Work* are filled with schedules and time cards, typed descriptions of workplace accidents, bargaining documents, and management theory texts. The interrelationship between neutral documentation and worker testimonials produces a shuttling back and forth between the objective and subjective dimensions of patriarchal capitalism, and the viewer leaves the exhibition with the impression that one cannot expect legislation from above to

reform the inequalities that characterize this system; instead, those who endure the inequities of a male-controlled workplace must engage in the patient struggle of collectively organizing in order to achieve substantial changes.

*Strike at Brannans* and *Women and Work* mark the emergence of a politicized form of conceptual art in Great Britain during the 1970s, one that is characterized less by a general style than the mobilization of various media (not generally recognized as “art”) towards activist ends and the incorporation of local political struggles. As Atkinson insists in a lecture recorded for *Audio Arts*, artists who address politics must remain flexible in considering the strategies required for representing different contexts, and this approach is incompatible with the development of a single medium or technique.<sup>liv</sup> If an imported Modernism insisted on medium-specificity and the gradual concentration of artistic activity into a unitary domain, Atkinson and other artists in Great Britain strove to utilize all available tactics to communicate meaning to a given audience. Writing on feminist artistic practices in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, Griselda Pollock echoes this attitude: “It is not a matter of choosing between figuration or abstraction, conceptual or scripto-visual forms, only one of which can be authorized as appropriate. It is a matter of calculating what effect any particular procedure or medium will produce in relation to a given audience, a particular context and the actual historical moment.”<sup>lv</sup> According to Atkinson, the different representational tools to structure visual reality at the artist’s disposal can potentially lay the foundation for action and concretely offer divergent interpretations of the current sociopolitical situation from those offered by the mass media and advertising. Indeed, the mass media and advertising in Great Britain during the 1970s were forces with which many

politically committed artists felt they had to contend. For some artists and critics, the battle between the arts and the mass media had already been lost: art had lost its public function over the course of the twentieth century—a disappearance that had only accelerated in the postwar period—and simply could not access the sheer volume of people the mass media summoned forth. Art critic Peter Fuller argued that the crisis of the visual arts in the 1970s was a direct result of its irrelevance and insularity in the face of the “mega-visual,” which is Fuller’s term for what Guy Debord defined as “spectacle.”<sup>lvi</sup> In light of these circumstances, Atkinson refuses a politically defeatist position, choosing instead to assemble all the means at his disposal to disseminate counter-information that opposes the public messages conveyed by spectacle.

As indicated above, Atkinson took advantage of the many daily and weekly papers that regularly covered art exhibitions in London as a means to draw attention to his exhibitions and the issues they presented. Like many conceptual artists, Atkinson explored the potential of circulation to establish new contexts and audiences for his work; however, his deployment of circulation was distinct from artists who identified as conceptual artists in London and New York, since it was through circulation that he established contact with spheres outside the realm of art. In the wake of conceptual art, both artists and art became much more itinerant: exhibitions were sent to museums and galleries in binders, and with the introduction of cheaper flights artists could travel abroad to produce site-specific works. Moreover, the proliferation of artist-run journals and magazines challenged the authority of the art critic as the ultimate arbiter of taste, which had far-reaching consequences for the manner in which art was understood and evaluated: some celebrated the empowerment of the artist, while others perceived a

nefarious ascendancy of the market—governed by galleries, dealers, and the financial speculations of collectors—at the expense of any critical assessment of art.<sup>lvii</sup>

In New York, dealer Seth Siegelaub was a crucial figure in the transformation of art from ‘object’ to ‘information,’ which in his hands became a strategy to market the latest avant-garde style to a new class of collectors and investors. Therefore, the ‘dematerialization’ of art proposed by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler did not negate art’s commodity status—as they may have hoped in 1967—but situated art within a nascent networked and ‘informatic’ economy: conceptual art, far from subverting the market, became the paradigmatic form of its most recent incarnation.<sup>lviii</sup> Siegelaub’s brand of conceptual art in New York ultimately capitulated to commercial and market forces, leading to a situation in which the radical promise of conceptual art—to produce a more democratic art that would challenge its institutional character and potentially expand its ‘public’—was effectively liquidated. Moreover, the gulf between the ‘public’ and conceptual art in practice is openly acknowledged by one of its major proponents, Joseph Kosuth: “the audience of conceptual art is composed primarily of artists...an audience separate from the participants doesn’t exist.”<sup>lix</sup> In Great Britain, *Art & Language* was characterized by a similar problem. As John Walker emphasizes in *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, most conceptual artists in Britain supported themselves through teaching posts at British art schools; therefore, there was little to no motivation to produce work that would be understandable to people unacquainted with current discourses of art—or, in other words, people who did not attend those very schools and visit galleries showcasing the most recent art. “Realistically,” writes *Art & Language* member Charles Harrison, “[our group] could identify no actual alternative

public which was not composed of the participants in its own projects and deliberations.”<sup>lx</sup>

Both reactionary and progressive artists underscored the blinkered mode of address that characterized conceptual art in its American and British manifestations. On the occasion of *The New Art* at the Hayward Gallery, which marked the official recognition of conceptual art as a dominant style in London, painters and sculptors were troubled by the displacement of pictorial form by abstruse theoretical cogitations conveyed in texts (some critics even accused Art & Language of using ‘private language’). However, feminist artist Margaret Harrison perceived a different problem: “To some of us conceptualism ended with the show...conceptual art was a mirror image of the art world it criticized. In other words, it was still in the cul-de-sac of art about art. What myself and many artists of that period were making was art...about the issues we had become involved in...The focus on subject matter led me (and others) into finding different forms and aesthetics...throwing up different ways of looking instead of fitting into a style of production.”<sup>lxi</sup> The emergence of conceptualism in America and Great Britain resulted in a sweeping renewal of aesthetic debate and introduced new formats through which artists could present their work, yet it could not escape the containment of art and failed to address any audiences beyond an already existing class of artists and collectors. Therefore, while the strategies of Atkinson and artists such as Mary Kelly and Margaret Harrison were influenced by the conceptual turn in the visual arts, they cannot be adequately described as “conceptual artists” since their work had fundamental links to social movements and political struggles. Circulation was deployed by Seth Siegelaub to entice collectors to purchase works by his stable of artists, and it functioned in *Art &*

*Language* to disseminate debates among an increasingly inward-looking group of participants; in contrast, Atkinson and Harrison, Kelly and Hunt discovered its ability to reach out towards publics beyond art's institutions.

In addition to exploring the potential of circulation—both his own mobility as an artist and the critical responses to his work—Atkinson also managed to court controversy by revealing what art institutions (and the British government that funded them) would not accept within their walls. When Atkinson told the director of the ICA he wanted his exhibition to focus on striking female workers in his hometown of Cleator Moor, his proposal was accepted. However, Atkinson did encounter censorship when he produced *Anniversary Print: A Children's Story (For Her Majesty)* for *Lives* (Fig. 27), an exhibition curated by Derek Boshier that was first scheduled for the Serpentine Gallery but which ultimately took place at the Hayward Gallery in 1978 due to a controversy. The Arts Council asked Derek Boshier to purchase works for its permanent collection, a request that was intended to signal a greater latitude granted to artists in influencing the character of art institutions. As curator, Boshier wanted to counteract the lack of public interest in the latest developments in contemporary art (exhibitions of conceptual art had very low attendance numbers) by creating an exhibition that contained work “based on people's lives.” *Lives* contained fine art but also included video, punk graphics, advertising, performance, cartoons, banners, and various other forms.<sup>lxii</sup> The Arts Council willingly accepted the diversity of media represented in *Lives* but it could not tolerate Atkinson's contribution. *Anniversary Print* may have not appeared in the exhibition—Atkinson's personal statement for the catalogue was also withdrawn—but the ensuing

debate that followed an explicit act of censorship on the part of the Arts Council undermined the alleged neutrality of arts funding and art institutions.

Atkinson's *Anniversary Print* addressed the controversy surrounding the hasty introduction and subsequent withdrawal of Thalidomide, a drug marketed by the Distillers Company to pregnant women to reduce morning sickness that was later discovered to cause birth defects. The Slade School of Fine Art commissioned Atkinson—along with 30 other artists—to produce a print to present to the Queen on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of University College in April 1978. *Anniversary Print* was produced in an edition of 55, one of which was purchased for the Arts Council's collection by Derek Boshier. The upper half of the print is a photograph that resembles an advertisement for the Distiller Company's products—bottles of liquor are arranged before the viewer against a backdrop of London on the right side (with the iconic dome of Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral dominating the image) and an idyllic depiction of the British countryside on the left. However, the display is interrupted by the text laid over it at the top ("ANNIVERSARY PRINT: FROM THE PEOPLE THAT BROUGHT YOU THALIDOMIDE") and a framed advertisement for "Distaval" at the bottom of the photograph, front and center. The bottom half of the print presents a history lesson in the form of a timeline of thalidomide's introduction to the market that contrasts the profits of the Distillers Company with the absence of any compensation for victims of thalidomide poisoning. Atkinson circles the words "the Royal Warrant" in the text on the lower half of the print and the symbol of the Royal Warrant that appears on bottles of Dewar's, Johnnie Walker, and Gordon's in the upper half, drawing attention to the link between the commercial success of the Distillers Company and the endorsement of the Royal Family:



“the connection,” Atkinson stated, “was that Distillers’ prestigious booze products are extremely lucrative because they carry the Royal Warrant, a valuable and legitimizing force in world markets, particularly in the States.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Following the removal of thalidomide from the market, advocacy groups and those negatively impacted by the drug made appeals to the Royal Family to remove the Royal Warrant from Distillers products, which had been ignored. In the original text that was to be included in the catalogue for *Lives*, Atkinson calls out the Royal Family for not responding: “If the Royal Family is of any use whatever it must be as a symbol of morality in our State. Perhaps it is, in lending its name to such an intrinsically and fundamentally immoral organization such as the multinational Distillers Company, symbolizing our morality; their main purpose is to make profits. Thus the monarchy becomes nothing more than a legitimizing, merchandizing force in the armory of monopoly capitalism.”<sup>lxiv</sup> In addition to lambasting the Royal Family, Atkinson also diagramed how the Distillers Company evaded financial liability for the victims of thalidomide poisoning through interest, government subsidies, and insurance: even if the corporation was indeed paying victims for damages, these payments did not cut into its bottom line through cunning accounting maneuvers.

*Anniversary Print* was first exhibited in *Approaching Reality* at the Serpentine Gallery in 1978, which makes its removal from Derek Boshier’s *Lives* perplexing; indeed, after many letters sent to and exchanges with the Arts Council Atkinson never discovered the reasons behind its withdrawal. Atkinson’s work was withdrawn from *Lives* along with Tony Rickaby’s paintings of buildings used by the National Front and other British right-wing and fascist groups. Two weeks before the opening of *Lives*, Atkinson received a telegram telling him to attend an Arts Council meeting: at the

meeting he was informed by two officials that his and Rickaby's work would not be included in the exhibition. "When I asked why," states Atkinson, "they looked at each other in embarrassment, and in a puzzled manner said 'We'd have to take legal advice before we can tell you what our legal advice was.'"<sup>lxv</sup> While Atkinson did not receive a straightforward answer from the officials representing the Arts Council, he could surmise certain factors that played a role in the work's withdrawal. The Serpentine Gallery was located in a Royal Park (due to the controversy the exhibition was relocated to the Hayward Gallery); the Arts Council had £3000 of shares in the Distillers Company; the Arts Council may have been preparing for an incoming Tory government, which could lead to funding cuts if the Arts Council condoned works that were deemed "left-wing"; Roy Shaw, Secretary-General of the Arts Council, was allegedly considered to be a candidate for knighthood. At first, Atkinson offered to alter the accompanying text to *Anniversary Print* since the print itself had been shown at the Serpentine Gallery six months earlier in *Approaching Reality*. However, after receiving scrambled messages from different figures representing the Arts Council—who claimed in one instance that the work would be exhibited if amended and in another that it was not up for consideration to be included in *Lives* at all—Atkinson issued a letter to Roy Shaw expressing his disappointment in the Art Council's lack of transparency and demanding the removal of his work (ironically, Shaw had previously issued a report that artists should attempt to make their work more comprehensible to the public). Atkinson also penned a letter to participating artists discouraging them from withdrawing their work in response to the controversy, but nevertheless urged them to work together to reform the relationship between the government and the Arts Council.

For Atkinson, the most scandalous aspect of the censorship and subsequent removal of works from *Lives* was the Art Council's failure to communicate its reasons for doing so beyond a vague intimation of potential legal troubles it could face. The Redcliffe-Maude report issued by the Arts Council a year earlier had stated the importance of having arts funding operate "at arm's length" from politics, yet the controversy surrounding *Anniversary Print* made it abundantly clear that the Arts Council—and the artists it funded—were financially and materially dependent on political groups and business interests beyond their control. As Atkinson wrote in his second letter to participating artists, "in my view the Arts Council is attempting to move into a dominating and decisive role...in the arts in preparation for the 80s which will see a 'tightening up' of the 'problematic' areas of at practice...In my opinion this will affect work in all media but most vulnerable will be documentation, work with sociopolitical content, performance work, and work which is contentious and moves outside the accepted norms."<sup>lxvi</sup> The controversy surrounding *Anniversary Print* prophesied the conditions artists would come to face with the rise of Thatcher. In December 1980, over 40 arts organizations lost funding due to massive cuts to the Art Council's budget; the budget for higher education also experienced major contractions. With less available funding for art that addressed sociopolitical issues and teaching posts at art colleges in short supply, many artists and curators who had made or supported politicized art in the 1970s turned (in many cases, out of necessity) to more traditional forms that could be absorbed by the commercial gallery system.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Despite the rolling back of progressive gains made during the 1970s, Atkinson still managed to find a forum to shape public and arts policy in the 1980s, acting as an

advisor to the Greater London Council from 1982 to 1986. As a large metropolitan authority, the G.L.C. functioned as a socialist counterpoint to Thatcher's government, stemming the tide of budget cuts through the implementation of various social programs devoted to improving housing, transportation, care for the elderly and also combatting gender and race discrimination. In addition to these broader initiatives, the G.L.C. also aimed to make cultural institutions more accessible to the public through staging exhibitions that were more inclusive of the various groups living in London. Steered by the Arts Council, art institutions such as the Hayward Gallery were out of touch with the everyday lives of Londoners: of 128 "international" exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery, only six came from countries outside Europe and the United States: "We think that is a very limited definition of 'international,'" states Atkinson, "especially since London probably has the most diverse group of ethnic minorities of any city anywhere."<sup>lxviii</sup> In addition to the limited scope of its exhibitions, the Hayward Gallery rarely exhibited one-person shows by living artists and only 10% of exhibiting artists were women. Moreover, the G.L.C. wanted to come up with alternative means of financing art institutions instead of relying on funding from multinational corporations that turn profits at the expense of people and the environment. While Atkinson initially had doubts about participating in a vast governmental bureaucracy, his involvement in the G.L.C. can be seen as a continuation of his efforts to intervene in society's institutions towards politically progressive ends.

Atkinson's engagement with British politics also brought him outside of London. In 1974, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland invited him to produce an exhibition that would be staged in Belfast, which was the first

time an invitation of its kind had been granted to a British artist. Beginning in the 1960s, Northern Ireland was wracked by social and political turmoil as a result of the conflict between Protestant loyalists and Catholic nationalists, the former wanting to remain a part of the United Kingdom and the latter wanting to join a united Ireland. The violence in Northern Ireland from both sides, referred to as “the Troubles,” would come to define the region over the next three decades. Northern Ireland was created by an act of parliament passed by the British government in 1921. There had always been simmering tensions between Protestants and Catholics, but in the 1960s they erupted into violent conflict that would ultimately claim over 3,000 lives and cause over 50,000 casualties. The armed struggle for civil rights did not remain in Northern Ireland but spilled over into Britain as well: in addition to fighting against British troops in the streets of Derry and Belfast, the Irish Republican Army also carried out bombing attacks in England.<sup>lxix</sup> The tense situation in Northern Ireland and Great Britain produced divisive polarization on the issue of Ireland’s independence; in such a context, measured debate that addressed the complexities of the conflict proved all but impossible. As Atkinson recalls, “[You] could only talk in slogans. All you could do was shout ‘Troops Out’ or ‘Socialist Ireland’ and [the loyalists] would shout back ‘you support indiscriminate civilian bombing,’ so there was no possibility of fine tuning the debate, and sometimes no debate.”<sup>lxx</sup>

In *A Shade of Green, an Orange Edge* (Fig. 28), Atkinson’s exhibition at the Belfast Arts Council gallery in 1975, he gathered together republican, security force, and loyalist imagery into an installation that did not hinge on a distinct authorial perspective but foregrounded the many perspectives of those engaged in the conflict. Instead of editorializing the materials and presenting his own position on the conflict, Atkinson

wanted to “elicit, with as little artifice, art or aesthetic overtones, the opinions of the people who painted the walls, sprayed or posted up notices or carried banners—the articulate with no media access.”<sup>lxxi</sup> However, it was clear from the arrangement of the exhibition—which included video interviews with victims of torture at the hands of British forces—that Atkinson believed the British military had to withdraw in order to resolve the conflict. Nevertheless, in addition to interviews with six republicans he also included interviews with six loyalist activists, who discussed the conflict and the legislation surrounding it. As critic John Hewitt writes, “[Atkinson] provides no third act, no resolution of the dissonant contraries, leaving it to us as spectators to make the effort to comprehend the particular state in which we find ourselves, and, as a gesture of audience-spectator participation, to add our own written comments on the surfaces available.”<sup>lxxii</sup> At the beginning of the exhibition, Atkinson provided orange, white and green paper on which viewers could record their responses to the Troubles. During the first several days, there was a diverse range of opinions pasted to the walls; however, once it became clear that opposing factions were planning to meet in the gallery for a violent confrontation the gallery was forced to remove the paper.

Atkinson lived in Belfast for several months leading up to the exhibition, taking thousands of photographs, meeting with civil rights organizations, recording interviews, and generally absorbing the rich visual imagery that covered the streets. As Atkinson states in an interview, in Belfast the “scar tissue of a whole generation was exposed in the city, painted on the pavements, walls, rooftops, on banners, everywhere.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> The title of the exhibition—*A Shade of Green, an Orange Edge*—calls to mind an abstract painting yet emphasizes the socio-political significance of color in Northern Ireland: slogans

painted in red, white and blue have different meanings from those in orange, white and green. In Belfast, color denoted “tribal areas” that could be “a matter of life and death” according to Atkinson, who recalls the process of researching the exhibition as one that involved potential dangers. A group in Derry contacted him while he was gathering materials and brought him to an attic that contained the bloodstained Derry Civil Rights Association banner that had been used to cover up bodies on Bloody Sunday, when British soldiers fired at 28 unarmed civilians who were peacefully protesting internment and torture, killing fourteen of them. They wanted him to include the banner in the exhibition, but Atkinson felt that it was too risky to include it since unsympathetic visitors could potentially destroy it. Instead, he used a photograph of the unfurled banner as the visual bookends for the hundreds of photographs displayed in the gallery.

In *A Shade of Green, an Orange Edge*, Atkinson takes a different approach from his other work, such as *Strike at Brannans* or *Asbestos*. In those exhibitions, he became an active participant in the issues he presented, acting as a collaborator and organizer with his subjects in an attempt to make corporate powers answerable to their offenses. However, the scope of the problem in Northern Ireland called for a different strategy, one that culled from the visual environment of Belfast in order to create an exhibition that was rife with contradictions and tensions, not proposed solutions. In London, *The Guardian* ran an article with the headline “Socialist Artist Goes to Northern Ireland”; the headline’s sardonic tone implies that because Atkinson’s previous exhibitions led to concrete outcomes (the unionization of factory workers, compensation settlements, etc.), by travelling to Northern Ireland Atkinson believed he could solve the problem there. In addition to vastly exaggerating Atkinson’s hubris—he has said “I want the kind of art

practice where the heroes and heroines are not artists or artists' egos"—the article places impossibly high demands on art while ignoring what it might actually be able to accomplish.<sup>lxxiv</sup> While he produces an art of concrete political effects, Atkinson still insists that one should not have bloated expectations for artists to change the general nature of society. Refusing the excessively utopian aspirations of the avant-garde, Atkinson wants viewers to visit his exhibitions and emerge "thinking that ideas are important and change is both desirable and possible."<sup>lxxv</sup>

In "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," Frazer Ward discusses the work of Hans Haacke and Fred Wilson and compares their practices with the utopian legacy of the historical avant-garde.<sup>lxxvi</sup> For the historical avant-garde, the museum had to be liquidated in order to sublate art into life, which would in turn revolutionize and transform everyday life. The relationship between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde as formulated by Peter Bürger, for example, is a tale of tragedy and farce: the historical avant-garde emerged in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to annihilate the autonomy of art and its institutions—such attempts failed, of course—and the neo-avant-garde repeats the disruptive gestures of the historical avant-garde in the postwar period but they remain hollow due to the fact that they take place within museums and commercial galleries.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Pushing back against this account, Frazer insists that a "small group of bourgeois avant-gardists could not have possibly changed the praxis of life," an assessment that in turn transforms how we might view art in the postwar period: if the claims of the historical avant-garde were indeed impossible at the particular historical juncture at which they emerged, then why are these claims used as a measure against which the neo-avant-garde is critically evaluated? Instead of severing the



historical avant-garde from the neo-avant-garde, Ward links them through the concept of “publicity”; as Ward writes, “the various forms of publicity are communications frameworks, which provide the conditions for the formations of publics.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> The argument that the historical and neo-avant-gardes failed because they did not extricate themselves from the institutional space of the museum must be abandoned, according to Ward, since the museum is by no means a monolithic space but can be utilized towards different ends, to which the critical interventions of Haacke and Wilson attest. As Ward writes, “Haacke's and Wilson's insistence about the role of the museum is precisely about performing art's function as publicity within a prescribed and always already compromised cultural space, in order to wrest from it a partial and contingent critical publicity, in terms of which a correspondingly mobile and perhaps strategic public might form. As against the grandiose claims that are made for the historical avant-gardes, here is an art of incrementally formed publics, an art of the little deal.”<sup>lxxix</sup>

While Atkinson is not mentioned in Ward's article, his artistic practice also utilizes the museum—as a space belonging to the public sphere—as a site from which counter-publics might be formed or, more accurately, supplemented by alternate means of publicity. Rather than a politics of refusal or negation, Atkinson makes do with the materials and resources that are made available to him—grants, institutional spaces, etc.—in order to communicate coherent messages to the various publics that attend museums. It is important, however, to view these publics as malleable and not fixed, since it is through exhibitions such as *Strike at Brannans* and *Asbestos* that Atkinson brought people into the museum who did not consider themselves part of that public. For Atkinson, the museum is not an institutional space that through its very essence co-opts

and neutralizes criticality; however, it is not ‘neutral’ either, since his *Anniversary Print* demonstrated the limits of what the museum—and the Arts Council—could accept.

Ultimately, Atkinson connects the museum to the world of which it is a part, heightening its imbrication in the issues society faces while also deploying it as a valuable resource in the political struggles that he aims to assist. In Atkinson’s hands, art sheds its utopian character: it is neither the space in which a freedom or autonomy that does not exist in everyday life can be expressed, nor is it a critical negativity that refuses any engagement with an already compromised world. Instead, in his exhibitions and accompanying activities Atkinson strives for an intelligibility that recovers the public function that both art and museums gradually lost over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the former at the hands of the mass media and the latter due to the rise of art as a form of escapist entertainment. In his fidelity to the assembling of facts in the service of communicable meaning free of ambiguities but certainly not of complexities—which may indeed be construed as a formal conservatism when set against the assault on meaning itself that characterizes much of the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—Atkinson reclaims the radical social mission of avant-garde art: to provide frameworks of critical understanding that can potentially recalibrate our perceptions of self and other, person and society.

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<sup>i</sup> *Art for Whom? An Exhibition Selected by Richard Cork*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).

<sup>ii</sup> “Art and Social Purpose,” *Studio International*, Vol. 191, No. 980 (March-April 1976).

<sup>iii</sup> Bernard Levin, “This Poisoning of the Wells of Art,” in *The Times*, May 1978.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> In a review published in *Artscribe*, critic James Faure Walker lambasted Cork’s *Art for Whom?* as well as *Art for Society*, an exhibition that addressed similar themes at the Whitechapel Gallery in May-June 1978. As Walker writes, “all art is ultimately for society by virtue of its being art. Its social purpose does not increase simply because artists pin-point specific audiences or incorporate ‘social’ subject-matter, underlining their social responsibility...advertising political allegiances betrays a lack of confidence in the inherent capacities of art to embrace social experience.” James Faure Walker, “The claims of social art and other perplexities,” *Artscribe*, No. 12 (1978), 16-20.

<sup>vi</sup> Documentation of *Asbestos* and *Iron Ore* is contained in Conrad Atkinson, *Picturing the System*, ed. Caroline Tisdall and Sandy Nairne (London: Pluto Press, 1981), 43-50.

<sup>vii</sup> Conrad Atkinson, “Asbestosis: A Development: Life and Profit,” in *Art for Whom?* exh. cat., reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 48.

<sup>viii</sup> J.T. Boyd, R. Doll, J.S. Faulds, and J. Leiper, “Cancer of the lung in iron ore (haematite) miners,” *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, Vol. 27 (1970), 97-105.

<sup>ix</sup> “Asbestos 1978,” conversation with Caroline Tisdall, published in *Picturing the System*, 16.

<sup>x</sup> Lucy Lippard, “The Continuing Education of a Public Artist,” published in *Picturing the System*, 77-80.

<sup>xi</sup> “Ideology and Consciousness,” *Audio Arts*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1977. Recording available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/volume-3/number-3>.

<sup>xii</sup> Conrad Atkinson, “Picturing the System,” in *Picturing the System*, 3.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Ideology and Consciousness,” *Audio Arts*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Atkinson, “Picturing the System,” 3.

<sup>xv</sup> Donald Kuspit, “Conrad Atkinson: Critical Practice ‘In Person’,” *ALBA* (Summer 1987).

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<sup>xvi</sup> Anthony Hudek and Conrad Atkinson, "Excavating the Body Politic: An Interview with Conrad Atkinson," *Art Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Summer 2003), 12.

<sup>xvii</sup> As John A. Walker argues in *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, many British artists began to view the dominance of artistic styles imported from the United States (e.g., Abstract Expressionism) as a form of cultural imperialism. For an account of the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism in the United States and its relationship to depoliticization and the rise of High Modernism, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>xviii</sup> Raymond Williams, "The Romantic Artist," in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia UP, 1958), 30-49.

<sup>xix</sup> The work of Hans Haacke also interrogates the business sponsorship of art institutions. In "MetroMobiltan," Haacke examines the involvement of the Mobil Corporation (which provided extensive funding to the Metropolitan Museum of Art) in providing oil to support the oppressive apartheid regime in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. By providing information that is otherwise effaced by what is now termed corporate "culture-washing," Haacke leads the viewer to reflect on the interrelationship between the profiteering of multinational corporations, authoritarian and oppressive political regimes, and the institutional spaces of art. See *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>xx</sup> Postcard reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 71.

<sup>xxi</sup> Timothy Rolins, "From Conviction to Fact: An Open Letter to Conrad Atkinson," August 30, 1981, reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 80-83.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For an account of Abstract Expressionism's relationship to various popular/mass-media discourses and disciplines, see Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997). Leja argues that the movement's interest in mining the depths of the individual psyche in the search for authentic and unconscious meanings aligned it with various 'popular' discourses and disciplines (for example, Hollywood film), which he terms "Modern Man discourse."

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Jackson Pollock: is he the greatest living painter in the United States?," *LIFE Magazine*, August 8, 1949; "American Fashion: The New Soft Look," *Vogue Magazine*, photographed by Cecil Beaton, March 1951. Andy Warhol would amplify Abstract Expressionism's oblique relationship to mass media forms of display and circulation, using repeated motifs of corporate logos and industrial/mechanical modes of manufacture that mirrored a flourishing consumer society. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Andy

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Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966," reprinted in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 1-49.

<sup>xxv</sup> Walker, *Left Shift*, 22-24.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "At the risk of naïvely idealizing a far from ideal situation, it seems to me that, even against the odds, progressive theory is more advanced and better integrated with practice in Britain; that audiences of every class are more politically aware on a day-to-day basis than they are in the US; that the left cultural community in London is more varied and more effective than that in New York—although both are sadly divided." Lippard, "The Continuing Education of a Public Artist," 77.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Conrad Atkinson," *Parachute* (March-April-May 1985), 20-24.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Picturing the System*, 9.

<sup>xxix</sup> In "The Artist as Ethnographer," Hal Foster argues that 'social outreach' artistic practices modeled on the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography—which are intended to 'decenter' authorship through collaboration and site-specificity—can ultimately reinscribe the authority of the artist through treating him or her as an 'expert' of reading culture as a text. One of the examples he gives of the potential pitfalls of this approach is the artist coming from afar who is commissioned to engage with a specific site/community for a brief period of time—without a sustained engagement between the artist and site/community, Foster contends, "the focus wanders from collaborative investigation to 'ethnographic self-fashioning,' in which the artist is not decentered so much as the other is fashioned in artistic guise." I would contend that Conrad Atkinson avoids this dynamic through his familiarity with the working-class communities with which he collaborated and the extended duration of his projects. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 171-205.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Picturing the System*, 9.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Lippard, "The Continuing Education of a Public Artist," 79.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Rollins, "From Conviction to Fact," 81.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Atkinson, "Picturing the System," 3.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> On the inadequacy of 'realist' modes of photographic representation, Brecht wrote: "Things have become so complex that a 'reproduction of reality' has less than ever to say about reality itself. A photo of the Krupp factory or the AEG tells us almost nothing about these institutions." Reprinted in Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 2011), 163.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Alison Green, "Citizen Artists: Group Material," *Afterall* (Spring 2011), 17-25.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> This statement was published in PAD/D's first newsletter.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> A.R. Upchurch, "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Keynes's Legacy," in *The Origins of the Arts Council Movement: New Directions in Cultural Policy Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> John A. Walker, *Left Shift*, 49-50.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Many critics, among them Peter Fuller, Robert Hughes, and Stuart Bradshaw, noted the absence of a coherent identity in the art of the 1970s. In 1980, Fuller delivered a lectured titled "Where was the art of the seventies?"; Hughes held the radical experimentation and heterogeneity of the 1970s in contempt, characterizing it as the "decade that buried the avant-garde": in a review in *Artscribe* from 1981, Bradshaw noted "a loss of centre in contemporary art; a reflection, I think, of a deeper loss of centre in society as a whole... In the seventies the optimism, faith in the future, and the belief in a mainstream largely disappeared. Art became fragmented into separate areas, none of which could hold the centre in the sense of supplying a dominant stylistic idiom or set of beliefs." Stuart Bradshaw, "It All Depends..." *Artscribe*, No. 27 (February 1981), 35; Robert Hughes, "Ten Years That Buried the Avant-Garde," in *American Art Since 1945*, ed. Dore Ashton (New York: Oxford UP, 1982).

<sup>xl</sup> *Collapse the Box*—Conrad Atkinson, program on Northern Visions NVTB, Belfast, 2015.

<sup>xli</sup> Margaret Harrison, "Notes of feminist art in Britain 1970-77," *Studio International*, Vol. 193, No. 987 (May/June 1977), 212-30.

<sup>xlii</sup> Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008).

<sup>xliii</sup> Documentation of "Strike at Brannans" is contained in *Picturing the System*, 9-11.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>xlv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xlvi</sup> Lippard, "The Continuing Education of a Public Artist," 77.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xliv</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Miens of Production," *Artforum* (May 2014).

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<sup>i</sup> *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1987), 7-8.

<sup>li</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lii</sup> Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*, 153-158.

<sup>liii</sup> Jane Kelly, "Mary Kelly," *Studio International*, Vol. 193, No. 987 (1977), 186-88.

<sup>liv</sup> "Ideology and Consciousness," *Audio Arts*.

<sup>lv</sup> *Framing Feminism*, 5.

<sup>lvi</sup> Peter Fuller, "Trouble with British Art Now," *Artforum*, Vol. 15, No. 8 (April 1977), 42-47; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995).

<sup>lvii</sup> Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015); Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>lviii</sup> Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," reprinted in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 46-52.

<sup>lix</sup> Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note to Art-Language by the American Editor," *Art Language*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (February 1970) reprinted in *Art and Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>lx</sup> Charles Harrison, "Art Object and Artwork," in Claude Ginz, *L'art conceptuel, une perspective*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989).

<sup>lxi</sup> Margaret Harrison, "Statement," *Live in Your Head*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000), 95.

<sup>lxii</sup> Walker, *Left Shift*, 238-239.

<sup>lxiii</sup> *Picturing the System*, 24.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Conrad Atkinson, original text for Lives catalogue, December 1978, reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 67.

<sup>lxv</sup> Ibid., 25.

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<sup>lxvi</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>lxvii</sup> In the Conclusion to *Left Shift*, John A. Walker describes how Thatcher's election dealt a huge blow to the Left and politicized artistic practices. Cuts to education pressured art students to give up on pursuing teaching positions and instead seek success in the commercial gallery system; businessmen like Jocelyn Stevens and Charles Saatchi took on expanded roles in the arts, the former becoming the Rector of the Royal College of Art and the latter opening his own gallery in 1985; curators welcomed the restoration of traditional forms and mediums. *Left Shift*, 255-257.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Rebecca Cochran, "An Interview with Conrad Atkinson: From the Political to the Popular," *Sculpture*, vol. 17, no. 7 (September 1998), 30-35.

<sup>lxix</sup> For an historical overview of the conflict in Northern Ireland, see David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002).

<sup>lxx</sup> *Picturing the System*, 19.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Conrad Atkinson, statement from *Lives*, exh. cat., (London: Hayward Gallery, 1979), reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 51.

<sup>lxxii</sup> John Hewitt, *A Shade of Green, An Orange Edge*, exh. cat. (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland Gallery, 1975), reprinted in *Picturing the System*, 52.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> *Collapse the Box—Conrad Atkinson*, video interview on Belfast public television.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Conrad Atkinson, *The State of the Art and the Art of the State* (London: Working Press, 1991), edited version of the Power Lecture, delivered at the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia, October 1983.

<sup>lxxv</sup> *Collapse the Box—Conrad Atkinson*.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Frazer Ward, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," *October*, Vol. 73 (Summer 1995), 71-89.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For an expansion of Bürger's concept of the rehashing of particular strategies of the historical avant-garde in the art of the post-war period, see Benjamin Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October*, Vol. 37 (Summer 1986).

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Ward, "The Haunted Museum," 73.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Ibid., 89.



## *Conclusion*

While my focus in this dissertation has been on artists working in London during the 1970s, in many respects the works addressed here point towards contemporary debates around socially-engaged artistic practices that employ strategies of participation and collaboration as ways of foregrounding the political dimensions of art. In this conclusion, I would like to touch on the ways in which the artistic practices covered here touch on a number of issues in these debates, which will be briefly outlined. Moreover, I want to insist that the work of Furlong, Willats, Atkinson and Kelly not be understood retroactively based upon the critiques that have been made of participatory art in the present; instead, it is crucial to situate the artists above within the specific historical horizon in which they operated, without losing sight of the ways in which their work offers compelling models for how artists can intervene in society and engage with different audiences to effect political change.

In the 1970s, artists like Willats, Atkinson and Kelly reacted against the conservatism of mainstream arts institutions by using new formats (video, installation, etc.), incorporating contemporary social and political issues, and forging alliances with audiences that did not attend museums and galleries. At a time when most art institutions in London were primarily exhibiting paintings and sculptures intended for aesthetic contemplation by an elite, bourgeois audience, the work of Furlong, Willats, Atkinson and Kelly was radical insofar as it experimented with new mediums of communication, explored the role of art in effecting political change, and recalibrated the role of the artist in this process. The collaboration that Willats, Kelly, and Atkinson used as a strategy cut

two ways: first, by abdicating a degree of authorial control over the outcome of works like *Vertical Living*, *Strike at Brannans*, and *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-75*, the artists above undermined the individualism of art production through a collective process (similarly, Furlong opened the space of *Audio Arts* to a diverse range of individuals and groups, acting not so much as an editor as a facilitator of discourse on the arts in London during the 1970s). Secondly, Willats, Kelly and Atkinson collaborated with groups—labor unions, nightcleaners, tower block residents—who were not the primary audience for art at the time, which opened the discursive field of art to a broader set of social issues and a wider public. The work of Furlong, Willats, Furlong, and Kelly challenged the conventional distribution apparatus of art—the museum, gallery, and market—and the ways in which artists exclusively served the dominant classes.

In most accounts of postwar art history, the contestations of the 1960s—the foregrounding of the spatial and phenomenological parameters of perception, the inclusion of class, gender and race into considerations of aesthetic experience, the examination of the ideological functions of art institutions, etc.—are summarized as a heroic overcoming of the strictures of High Modernism, which advocated a formalism that evaded questions of subjectivity and social content. The artists above—while motivated by a desire to confront the immediate sociopolitical context of London in the 1970s—are part of a broader post-medium proliferation of artistic practices following in the wake of the decline of High Modernism; the work of Furlong, Willats, Atkinson and Kelly is unique inasmuch as the alliances they forged are specific to a particular time and place, yet it must be understood in relation to a whole range of artistic practices emerging

in various locations during this period that strived to produce political effects, whether inside art institutions or in society more generally. In dissolving the alleged autonomy of art, including communities that had formerly been excluded from art institutions, and foregrounding the social and political dimensions of artistic practice, the artists who challenged a hegemonic High Modernism formulated what has now become a dominant strain of contemporary art in the present. While museums and galleries were not entirely receptive to such work in the 1960s and 1970s, today art institutions welcome work that is dematerialized, participatory, socially-engaged and open-ended. While artists complained of the asocial and isolated character of art in the 1960s and 1970s, in the present contemporary art is far from insular: it is distributed among various communities and locations and extremely conscious of the exclusionary standards of Art.

More recently, a range of art historians have begun to look more critically at strategies of dematerialization, participation, and collaboration since they have now become dominant forms of artistic practice. When set against the lone artist creating discrete objects to be displayed in the white cube of the gallery space and sold on the art market, artists who refused this role in the 1960s and 1970s by making dematerialized, participatory projects were understood initially to contest the commodification and political neutralization of art. However, as art historians Miwon Kwon and Alexander Alberro have shown, dematerialization does not necessarily mean that art circumvents its commodity status. Indeed, as Kwon writes, “ideas and actions do not debilitate or escape the market system because they are dematerialized; they drive it precisely because so.”<sup>i</sup> When artists transformed art-as-object into art-as-idea with conceptual art, art dealers still managed to devise ways to promote these artistic practices on the market by selling

documentation of the works (photos, texts, etc.) or securing contracts between artists and art institutions. Moreover, Lane Relyea and James Meyer have argued that artistic work that is participatory, open-ended, temporary, in flux, and networked does not challenge the dominant order as much as it imitates the organizational patterns of neoliberal capitalism. In certain forms of contemporary art, participation and collaboration are service-products offered by art institutions, with artists using the networks they develop and enhance through their travels as platforms of self-promotion. The ways in which art historians have begun to unpack the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s in the present is an important development, insofar as artistic strategies need to be considered in relation to the contexts in which they function; participation and collaboration are not fixed concepts but need to be historicized. Just because a work of art requires greater quantities of audience involvement does not necessarily make it more democratic or politicized, and critics have drawn on a range of theories (the logic of gift exchange, antagonistic models of democracy) in order to produce more complex analyses of these types of artistic practices.

For those who problematize the celebratory rhetoric of participation and collaboration, it is crucial to examine the historical and social dynamics of artistic practices that use these strategies. Participation and collaboration must be understood and evaluated in relation to the nature of the encounters they engender, the kinds of social results they produce, and the relationships formed between artist and audience. The most common criticism of participatory art is that it is innocuous and inconsequential, insofar as it does not examine ideological, historical or political issues but merely offers viewers novel and entertaining diversions. As Janet Kraynak describes a sampling of participatory

art in the present, “the viewer engages in lighthearted activities: relaxing on a lovely dock installed above a lake, eating food served by the artist, or playing with an inviting mass of sculptural putty while listening to the music of the indie band Stereolab on a Walkman. In these (and other) examples the once radical premises and potentially destabilizing effects of participation are transmogrified into a user-friendly doctrine of artistic viewing.”<sup>ii</sup>

Similarly, Claire Bishop has criticized the ways in which artistic practices associated with relational aesthetics foreground flexibility and socialization as formal merits yet do not reflect enough on the investments and identifications of the artist, the contexts in which they operate, or the communities with whom they engage. As she writes, “unhinged both from artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate, relational artworks become...just a ‘constantly changing portrait of the heterogeneity of everyday life,’ and do not examine their relationship to it. In other words, although the works claim to defer to their context, they do not question their imbrication within it.”<sup>iii</sup>

As I hope to have demonstrated, the forms of participatory and socially-engaged art addressed in this dissertation do not simply involve the audience as an abstract end-it-itself, nor do they understand context apart from a consideration of a specific time and place. Most importantly, they forcefully ask questions concerning the ideological functions of art institutions, the social and political roles of art, and the kinds of publics that art generally summons forth. Of the works covered in this dissertation, I would contend that *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry, 1973-75* offers the most compelling model of what participation and collaboration can achieve in producing more democratic and politicized forms of art that also reflect on ideology,

history and society. In *Women and Work*, Kelly—along with Kay Fido Hunt and Margaret Harrison—worked with over 150 employees of a metal box factory over the course of two years in order to understand and ultimately represent the patterns of labor there in an exhibition that contained a range of materials: photographs of employees, time cards, schedules, management theory texts, videos of workers inside the factory, documentation of labor disputes and workplace accidents. Kelly, Hunt and Harrison not only recalibrated the ways in which artists produced work—instead of working in a studio to produce objects to be exhibited subsequently, they entered a situation and amassed information through collaborative research aided by their engagement with a particular community—but also reflected on the various dimensions (social, ideological, political) and locations (domestic, professional) of the specific problem they analyzed: the tendency of capitalism to marginalize and exploit female labor. By immersing themselves in a given context and observing its operational structure, Kelly, Hunt and Harrison present a comprehensive portrait of a particular issue that resonated with a more generalized problem in society. What is most compelling about *Women and Work* is how it incorporates the subject positions of the artists themselves, who were similarly treated as inferior to their male counterparts in the art world. Kelly, Hunt and Harrison did not simply conflate the industrial labor at the metal box factory and their work as artists but produced the grounds for allegiances and identifications across different domains of female labor, which could potentially lead to collective action. As a founding member of the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, Kelly recognized the ways in which female artists faced great disadvantages due to their neglect by museums, galleries, and art schools, and she wanted to apply pressure on art institutions to produce more systems

of support for women. However, in her work as both an artist and activist she wanted to create transversal alliances with women in realms outside the art world, and she regarded her involvement with the women's movement as a crucial component of her artistic practice. Ultimately, *Women and Work* uses participation and collaboration not simply as a way of subverting then dominant understandings of who made art—the male “genius”—but also as a means for art to recalibrate our understanding of the processes of everyday life. This type of work implies both a political way of producing art and an art that can produce political change, which is a goal that artists who use the strategies of participation and collaboration should continue to pursue.

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<sup>i</sup> Miwon Kwon, "Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After," in *Work Ethic*, exh. cat., ed. Helen Molesworth (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), 84.

<sup>ii</sup> Janet Kraynak, "Dependent Participation: Bruce Nauman's Environments," *Grey Room*, No. 10 (Winter, 2003), 30.

<sup>iii</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004), 64-65.



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*Fig. 1.* Audio Arts cassette.



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### BACK ISSUES

The first issue of Audio Arts was published in October 1973. Since then over sixty cassettes have been produced. A catalogue of back issues is available on request from the above address.

'Live to Air' comprises an international compilation of artists' sound works. Forty-five artists were invited to make a work for the context of Audio Arts with an approximate duration of five minutes. The medium of magnetic tape, and the processes and technologies associated with sound recording, now represent a significant and growing area of art practice that has, up until now, been largely overlooked. This work has no form other than playback from tape, as opposed to the recording function being used 'passively' as a method of retaining an acoustic event, or acting as a strategy for other work. Furthermore, the processes of working with sound provide artists with similar manipulative, structural and ideological freedoms and possibilities to those normally associated with the traditional media, such as painting, sculpture and collage. In many respects this audial/technological 'space' is parallel to the physical space of a gallery, yet extends it through the potential of widespread

dissemination inherent in the multiple production of cassettes and through broadcasting.

**This issue includes 3 x C82 cassettes produced in DOLBY Stereo.**

*Live to Air is divided into four sections, spread over three cassettes as detailed below. Each piece is separated by a 7 second silence and sections are divided by a high pitched tone.*

Produced to coincide with Audio Arts at the Tate Gallery, London, August & September 1982.

ROCK IDIOMS	IMAGES & NARRATIVE	TECHNOLOGICAL & AUDIAL SPACE	URBAN REFERENCE
Works that use rock idioms and their associated structures	Works that construct narrative through the juxtaposition and collaging of sounds and images	Works that are concerned with, and refer to the audial space created by recording technology	Works focussing on the relationship between the individual and the urban environment
<b>side 1</b> Bruce McLean Julia Heyward Rod Summers Art & Language Barbara Ess Dan Graham <b>side 2</b> Clive Robertson Yura Adms David Garland	<b>side 2 cont ...</b> Tina Keane Jacki Apple Adrian Hall Arleen Schloss <b>side 3</b> Richard Layzell Ian Breakwell Bob George Ian Murray Hannah O'Shea Rose Garrard Gerald Newman <b>side 4</b> Silvia C. Ziraneck	<b>side 4 cont ...</b> Lawrence Weiner/ Peter Gordon Connie Beckley Charlie Hooker Anti Music Maurizio Nannucci Hank Bull <b>side 5</b> David Cunningham Jack Goldstein Tom Marioni David Troostwyk Dieter Roth	<b>side 5 cont ...</b> Kerry Trengove Helen Chadwick John Carson <b>side 6</b> Vito Acconci Stuart Brisley Les Levine F. Uwe Laysiepen/ Marina Abramovic Roberta M. Graham Steve Willats Elsa Stansfield/ Madelon Hooykaas

Fig. 2. Audio Arts, *Live to Air: Artists' Sound Works*, Vol. 5, Nos. 3 & 4, produced to coincide with Audio Arts at the Tate Gallery, London, August & September 1982.

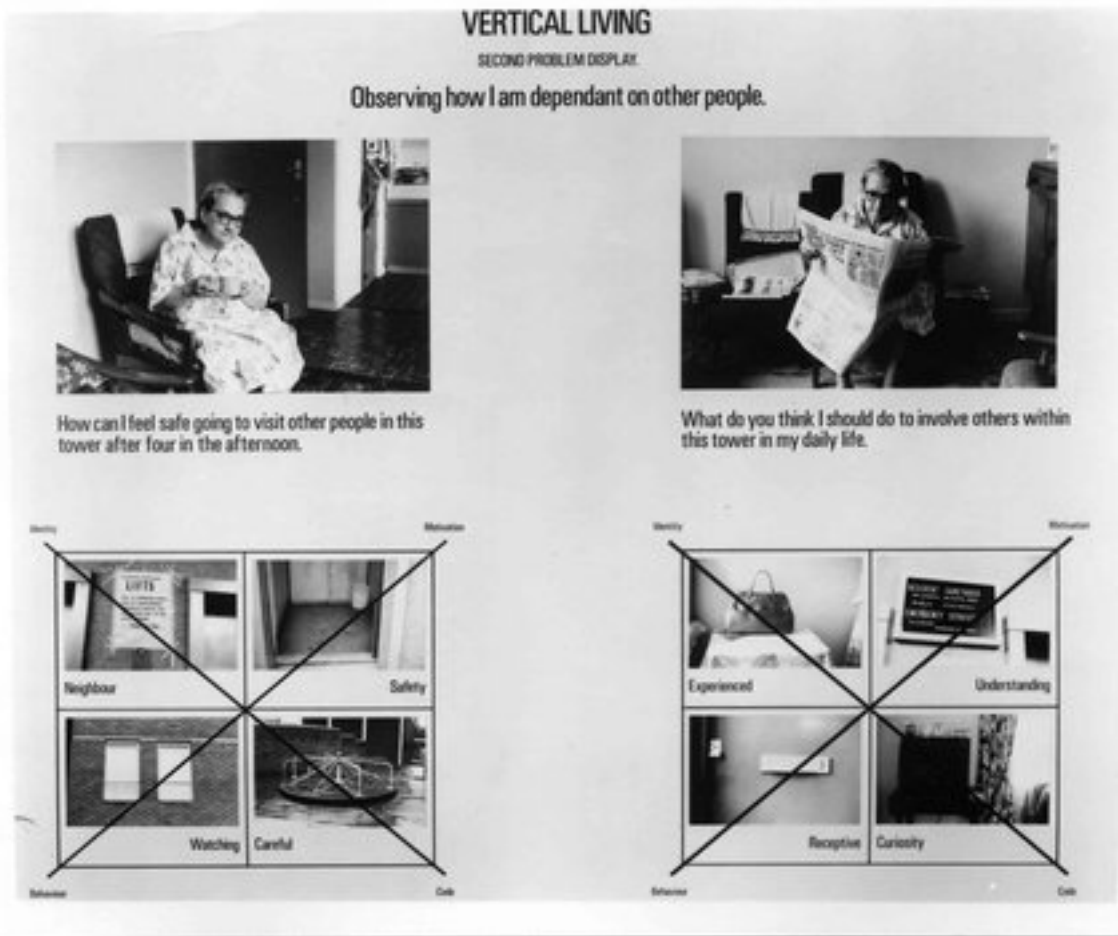


Fig. 3. Stephen Willats, *Vertical Living*, 1978, Second Problem Display.

What does  
possession  
mean to you?



7% of our population  
own 84% of our wealth

The Economist, 15 January, 1968

Fig. 4. Victor Burgin, *Possession*, 1976.



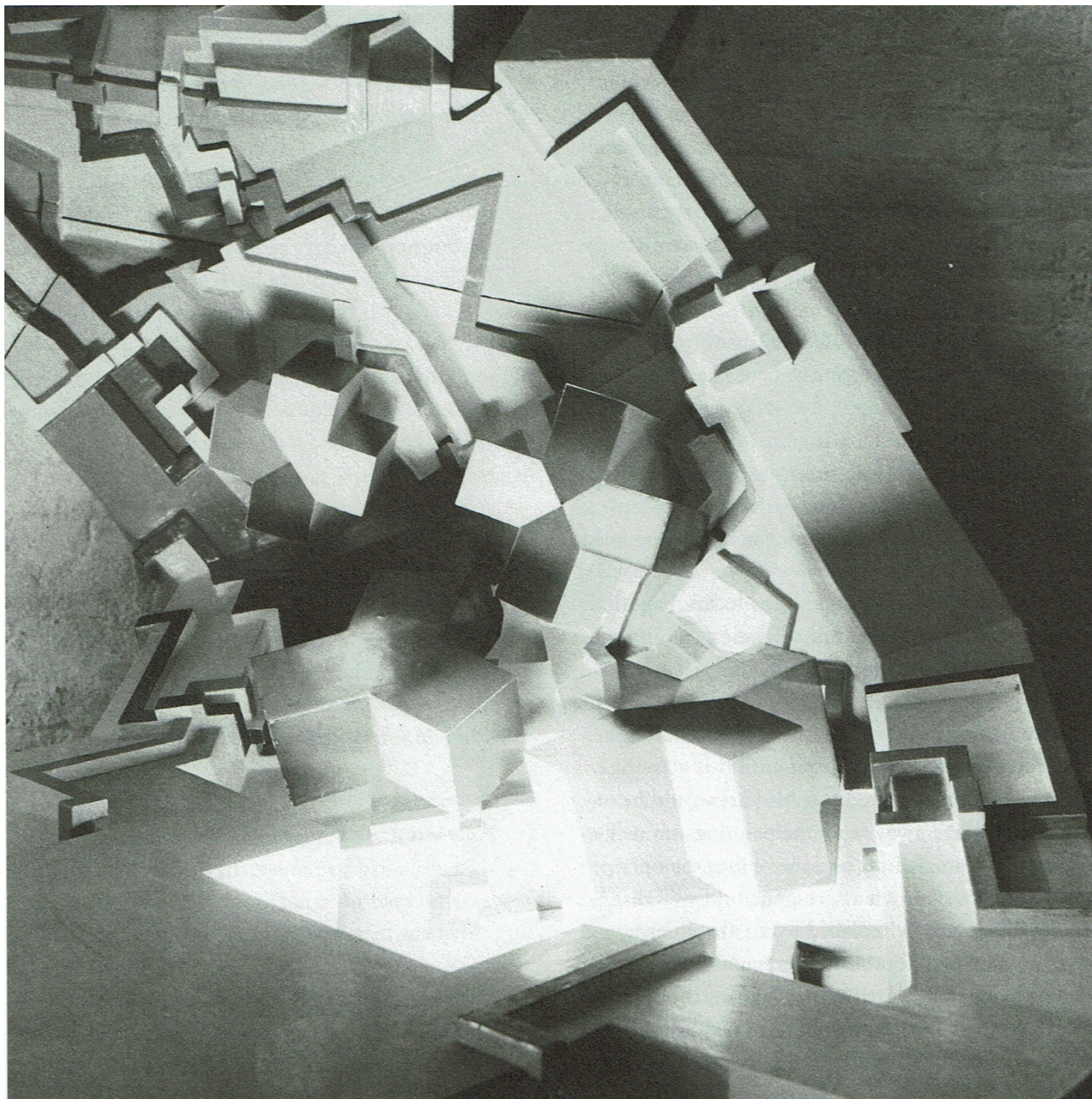
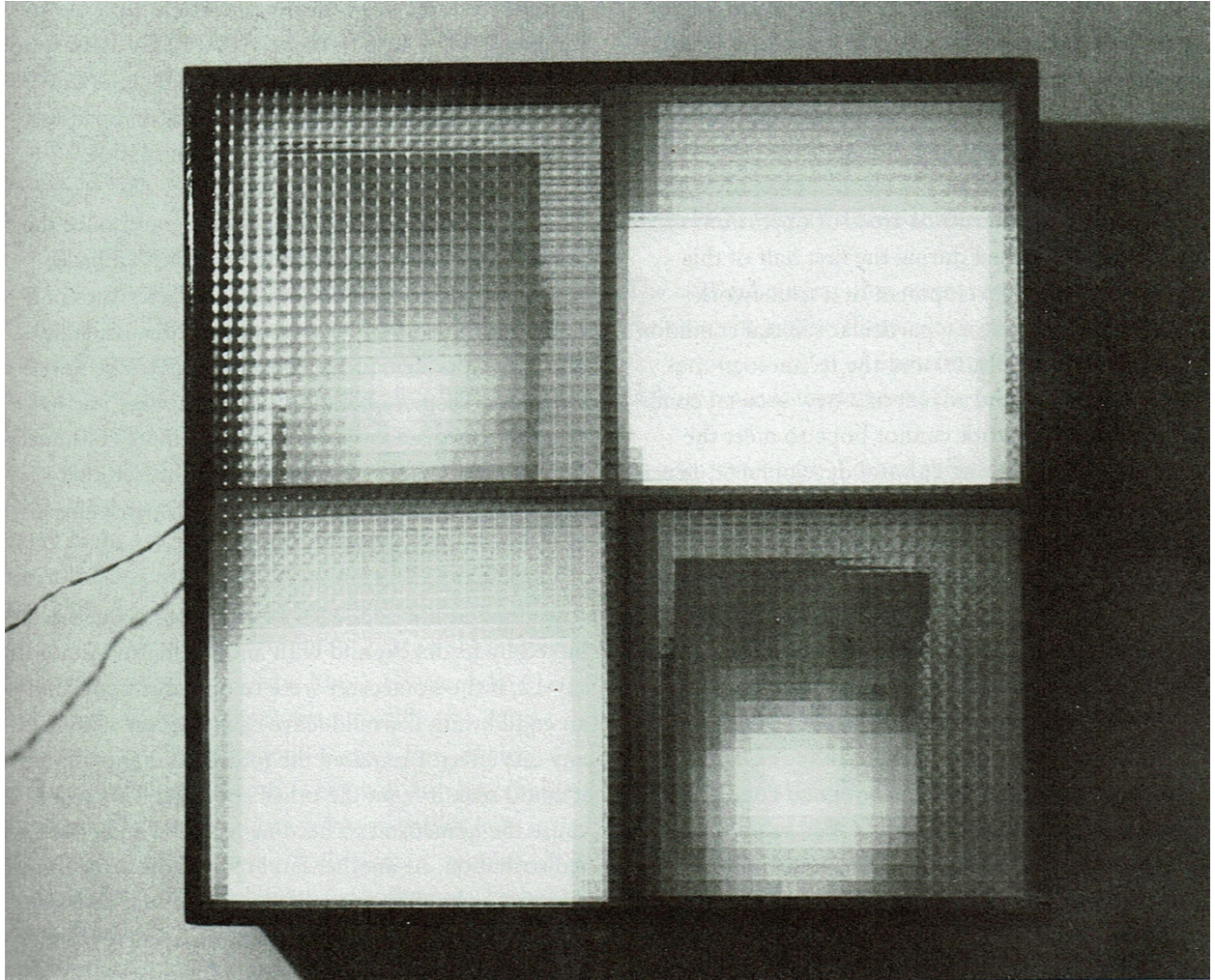
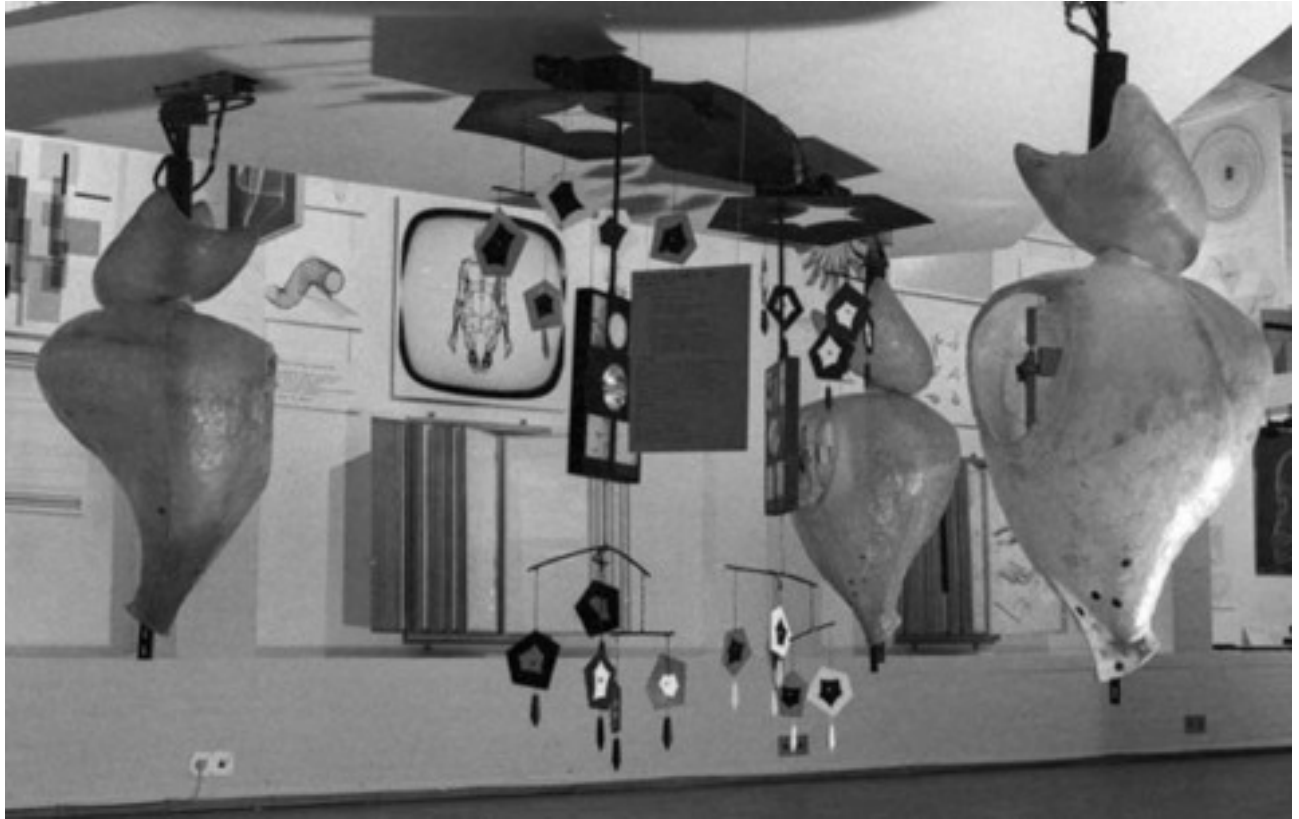


Fig. 5. Stephen Willats, *Visual Transmitter No. 3*, 1966-1968.





*Fig. 6.* Stephen Willats, *Shift Box No. 2*, 1964.



*Fig. 7. Gordon Pask, Colloquy of Mobiles, 1968, Installation View of “Cybernetic Serendipity,” ICA, London.*



*Fig. 8. Victor Pasmore, Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink, 1963.*



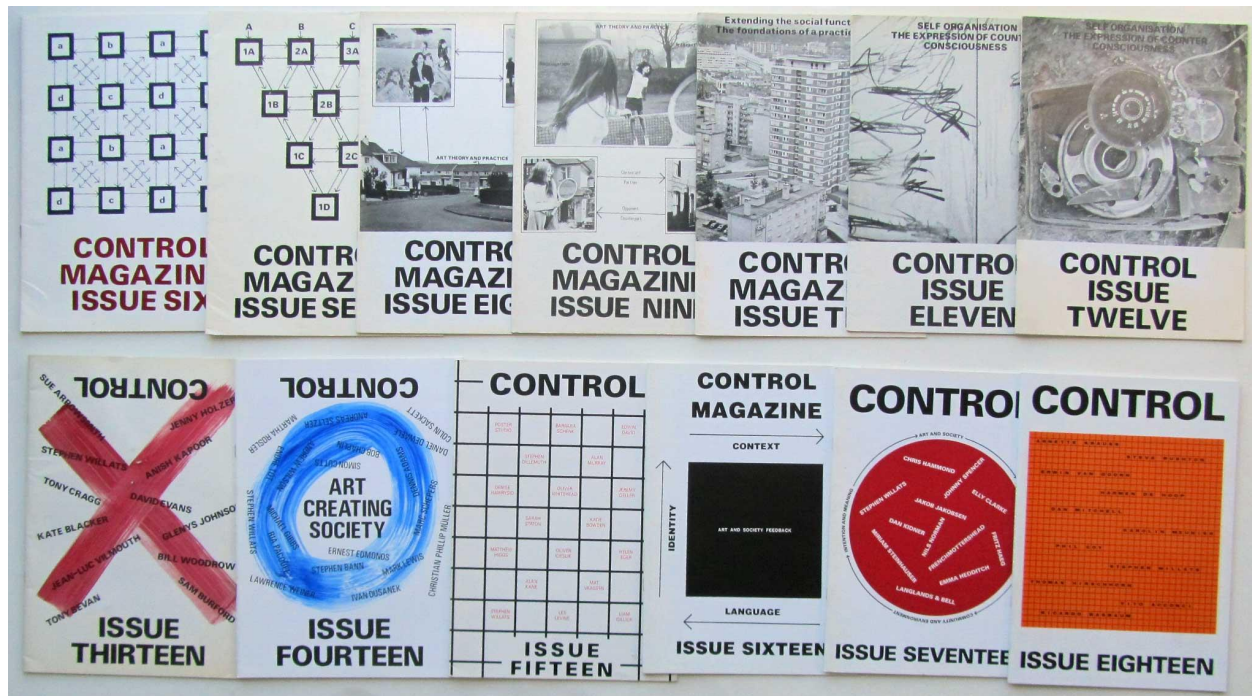


Fig. 9. *Control Magazine*, Issues Six to Eighteen.

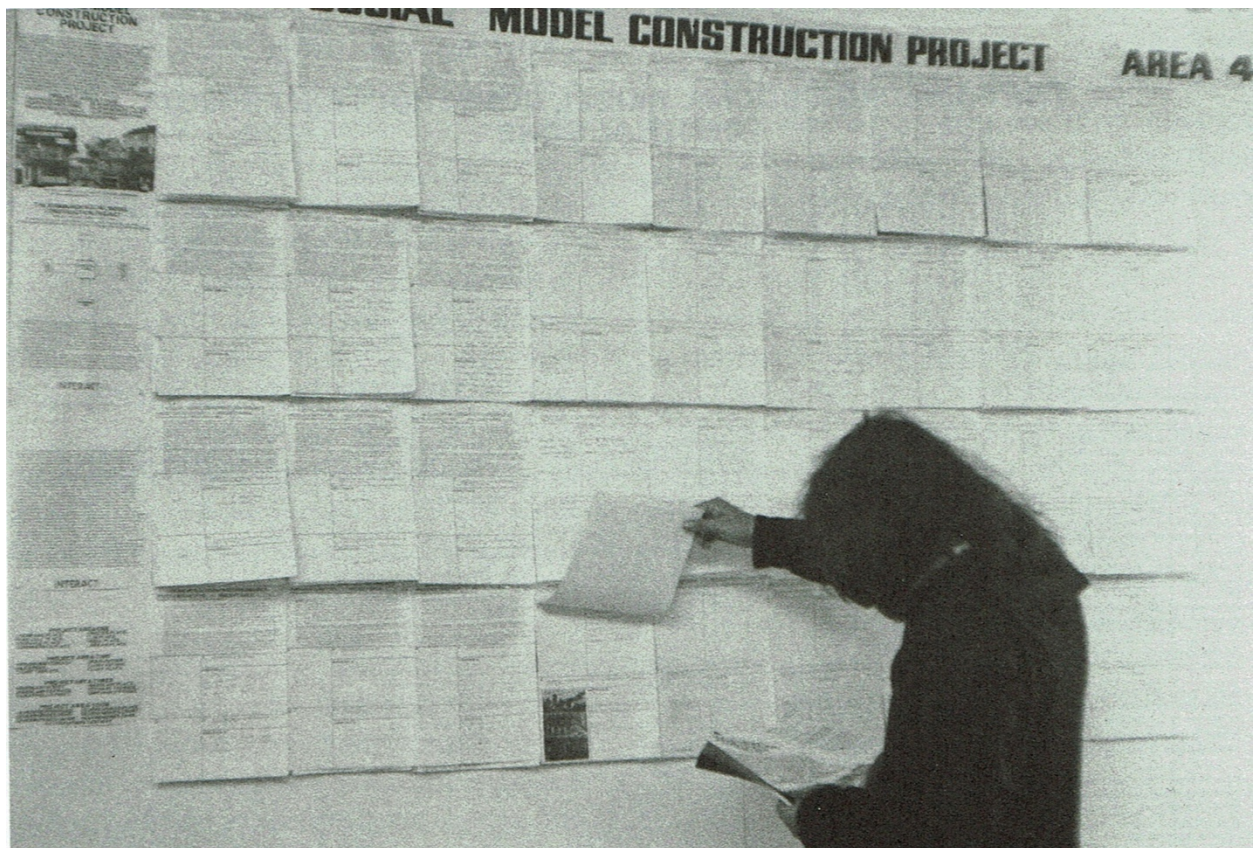
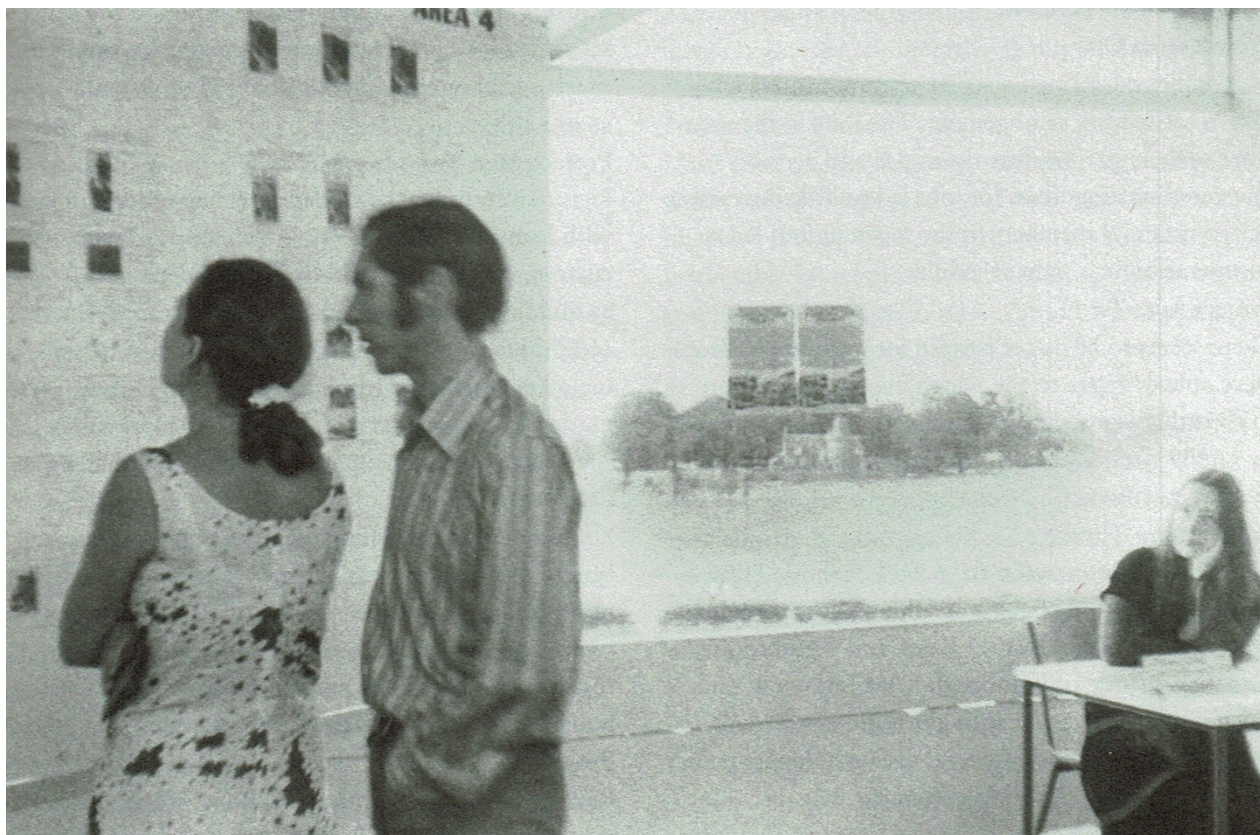


Fig. 10. Stephen Willats, *Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project*, 1973.





*Fig. 11. Stephen Willats, Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project, 1973.*



*Fig. 12. Stephen Willats, Meta Filter, 1973-75.*



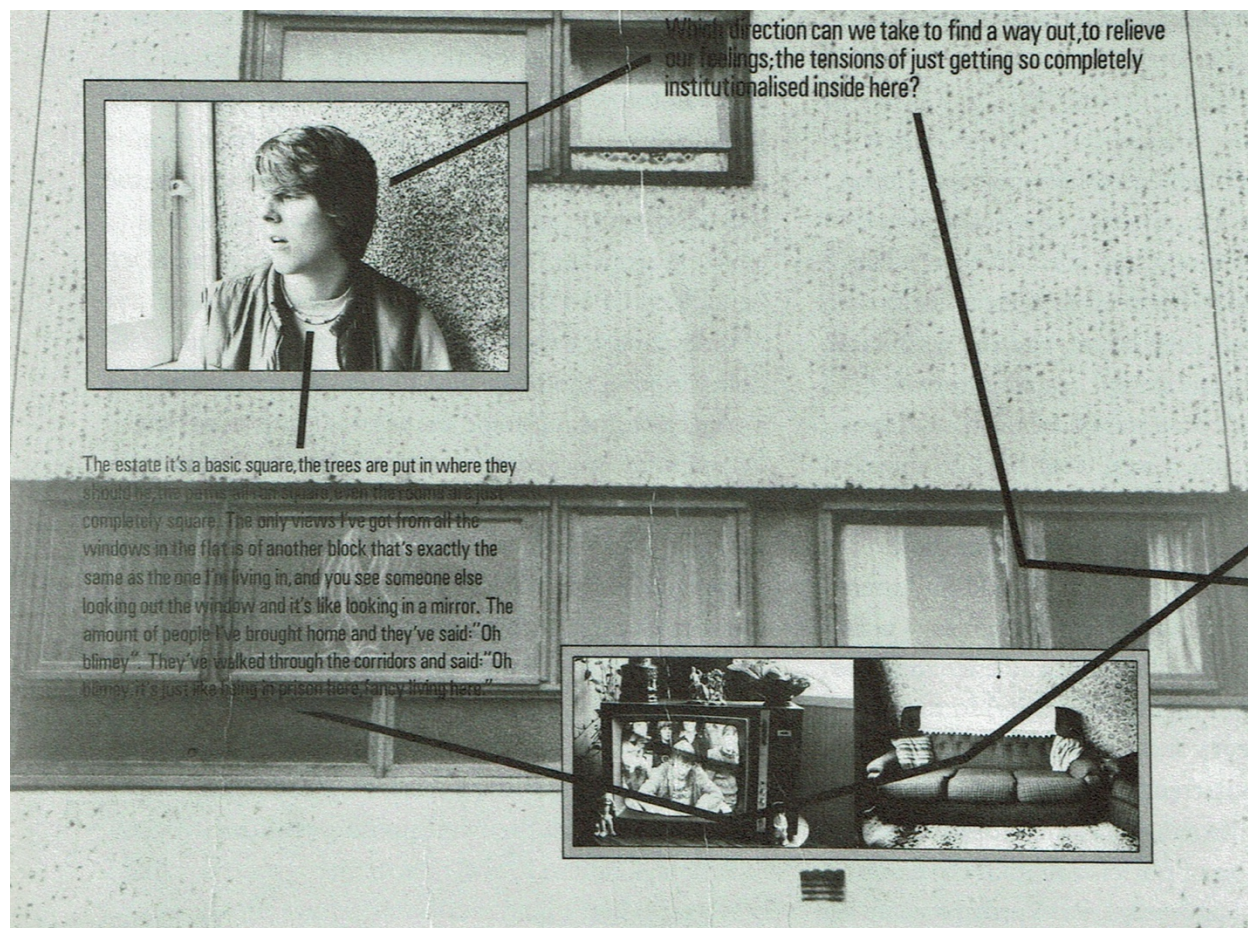


Fig. 13. Stephen Willats, *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp*, 1981-82. Panel One of Twelve.



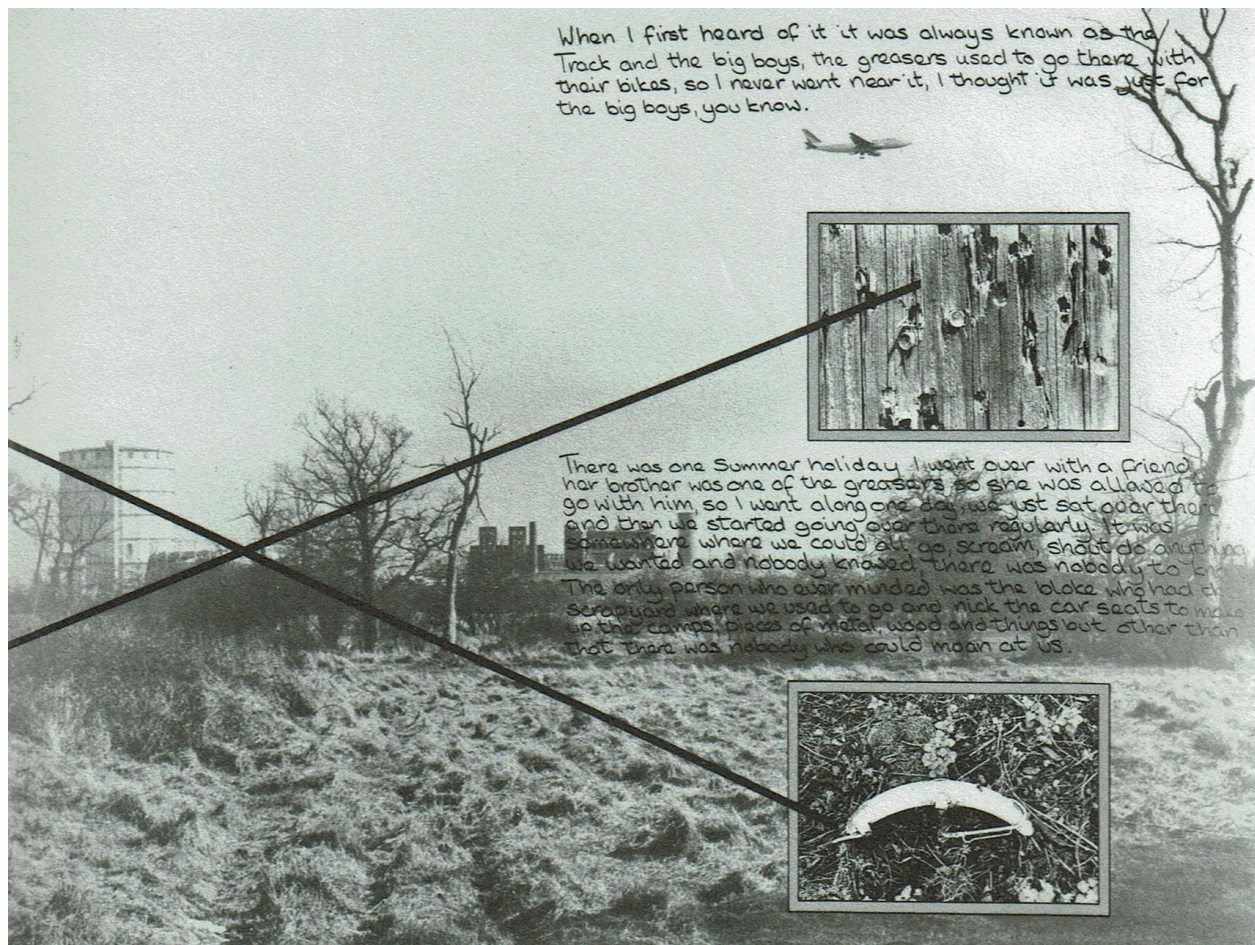


Fig. 14. Stephen Willats, *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp*, 1981-82. Panel Three of Twelve.

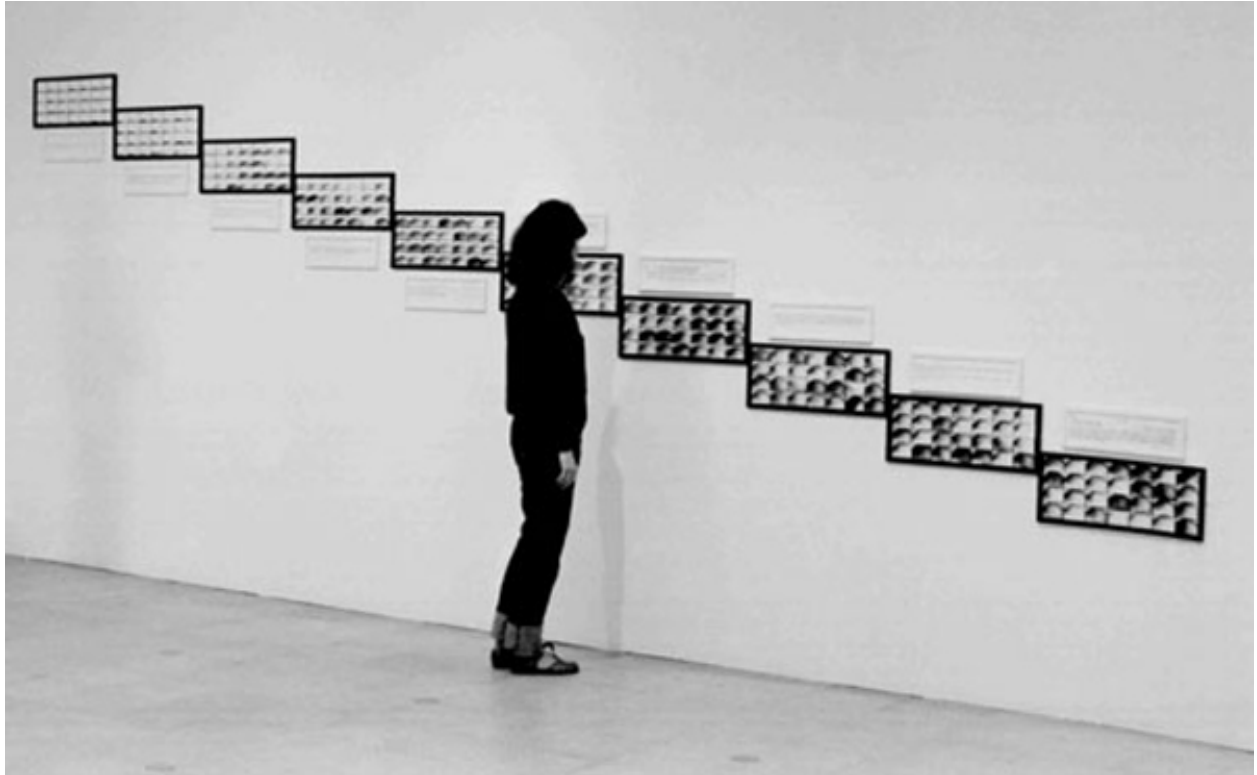




*Fig. 15. Stephen Willats, Are you Good Enough for the Cha Cha Cha?, 1982.*



Fig. 16. Audio Arts, *Ideology & Consciousness*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1977, with contributions by Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller and Conrad Atkinson.



*Fig. 17. Susan Hiller, 10 Months, 1977-79.*



*Fig. 18. Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document, 1973-79, installation view, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981.*







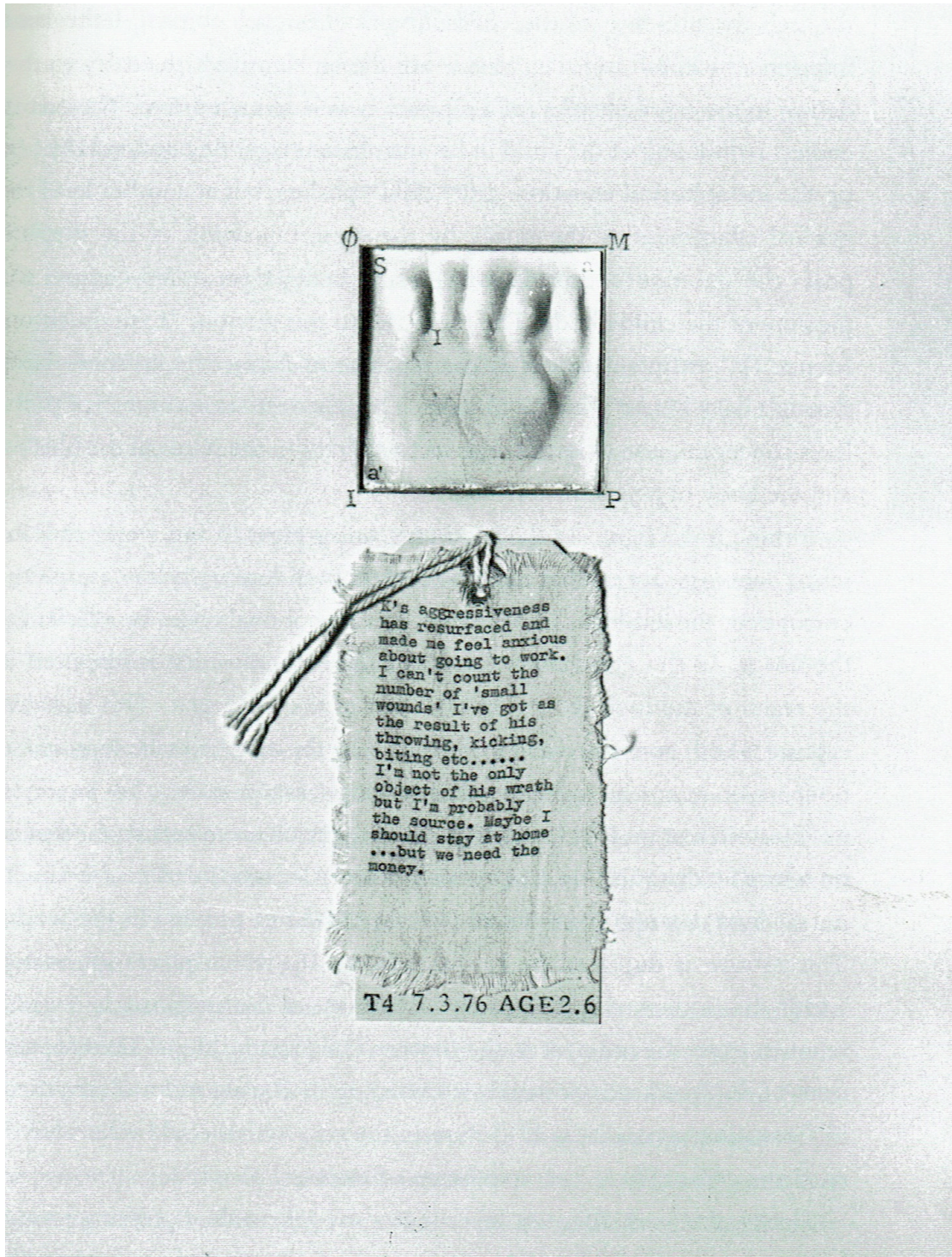
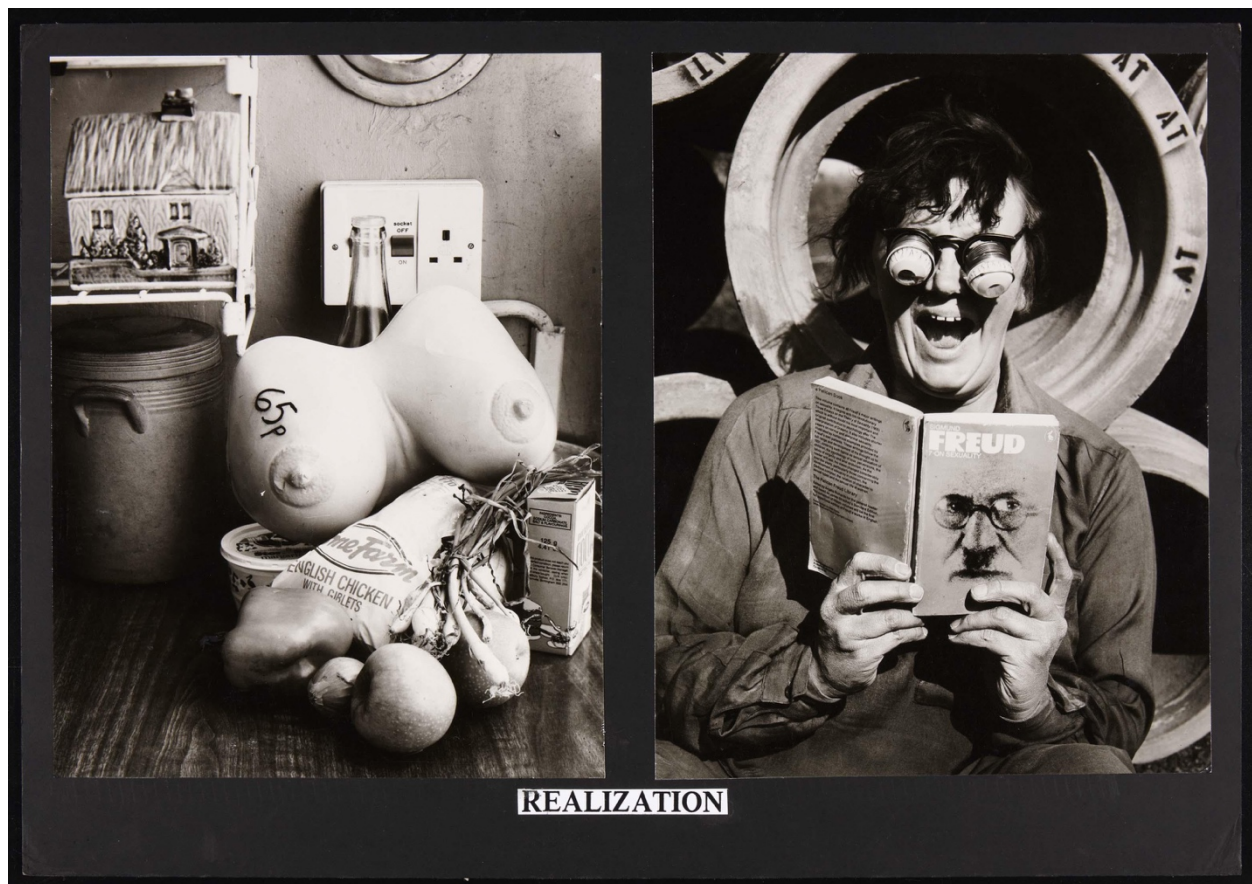


Fig. 20. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79, detail of *Documentation IV: Transitional objects, diary, and diagram*, 1976.





*Fig. 21. Jo Spence, Remodelling Photo History, 1981-82.*

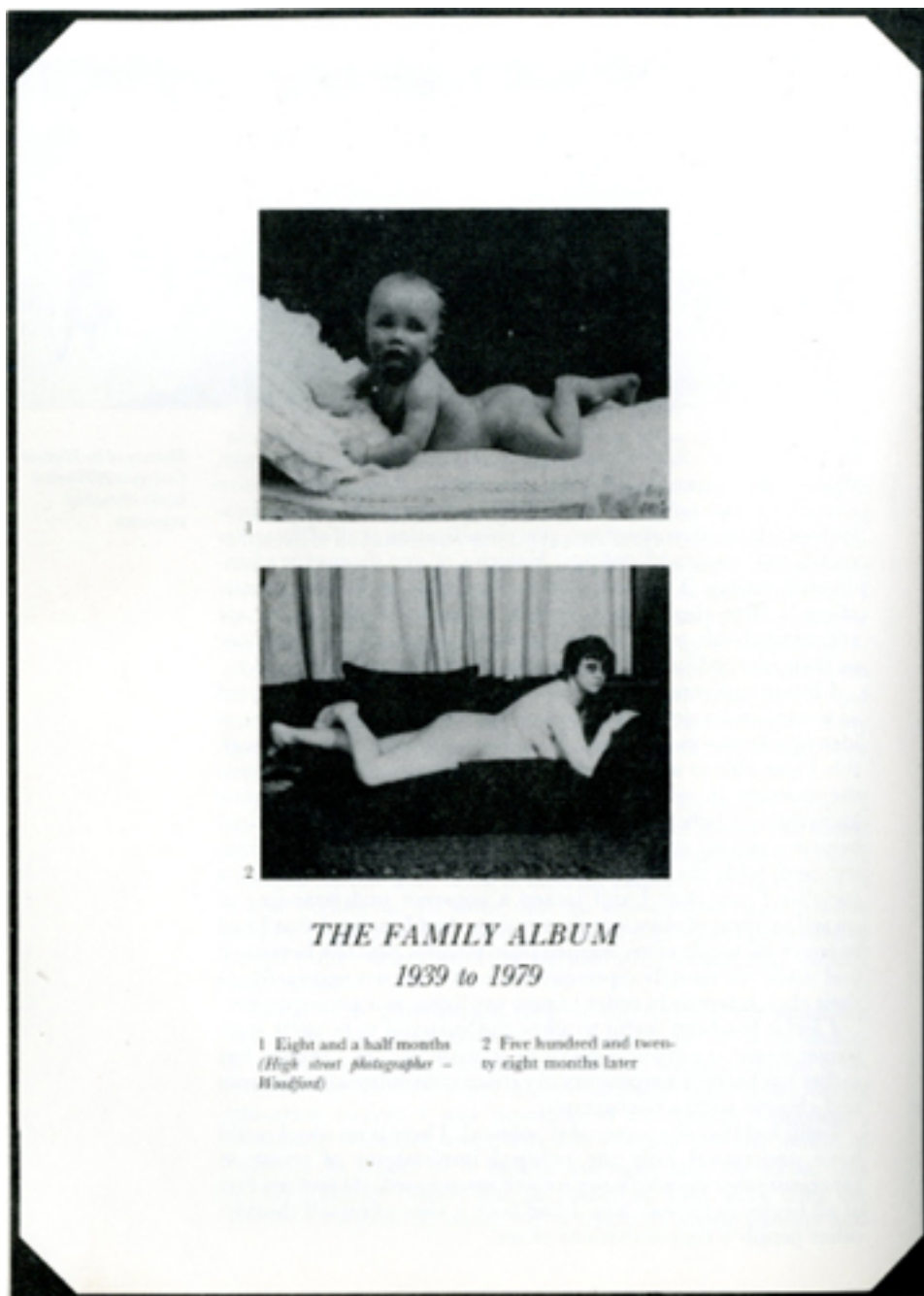


Fig. 22. Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979.

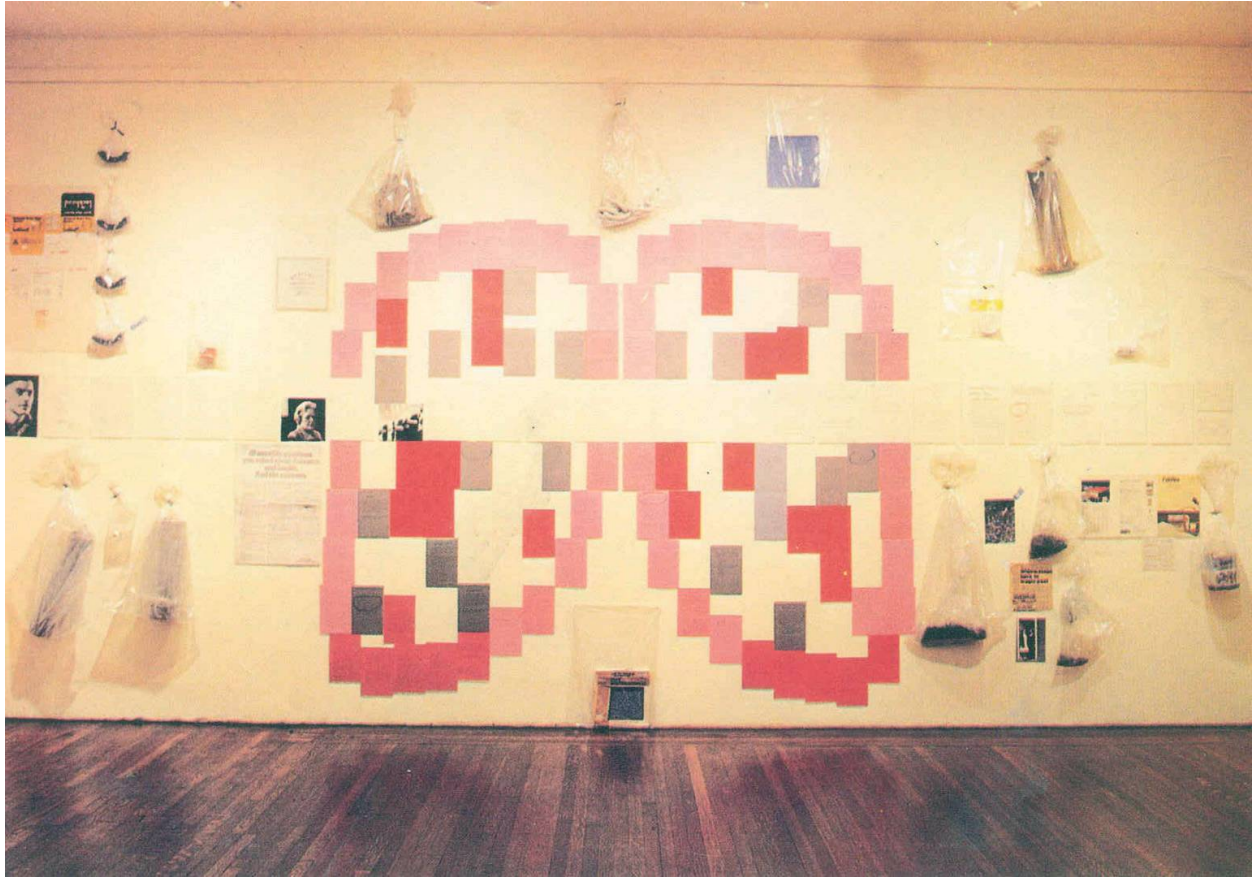


Fig. 23. Conrad Atkinson, *Asbestos*, 1978.





Fig. 24. Postcard by Conrad Atkinson, *Who said Art and Politics don't mix...*, c. 1980.

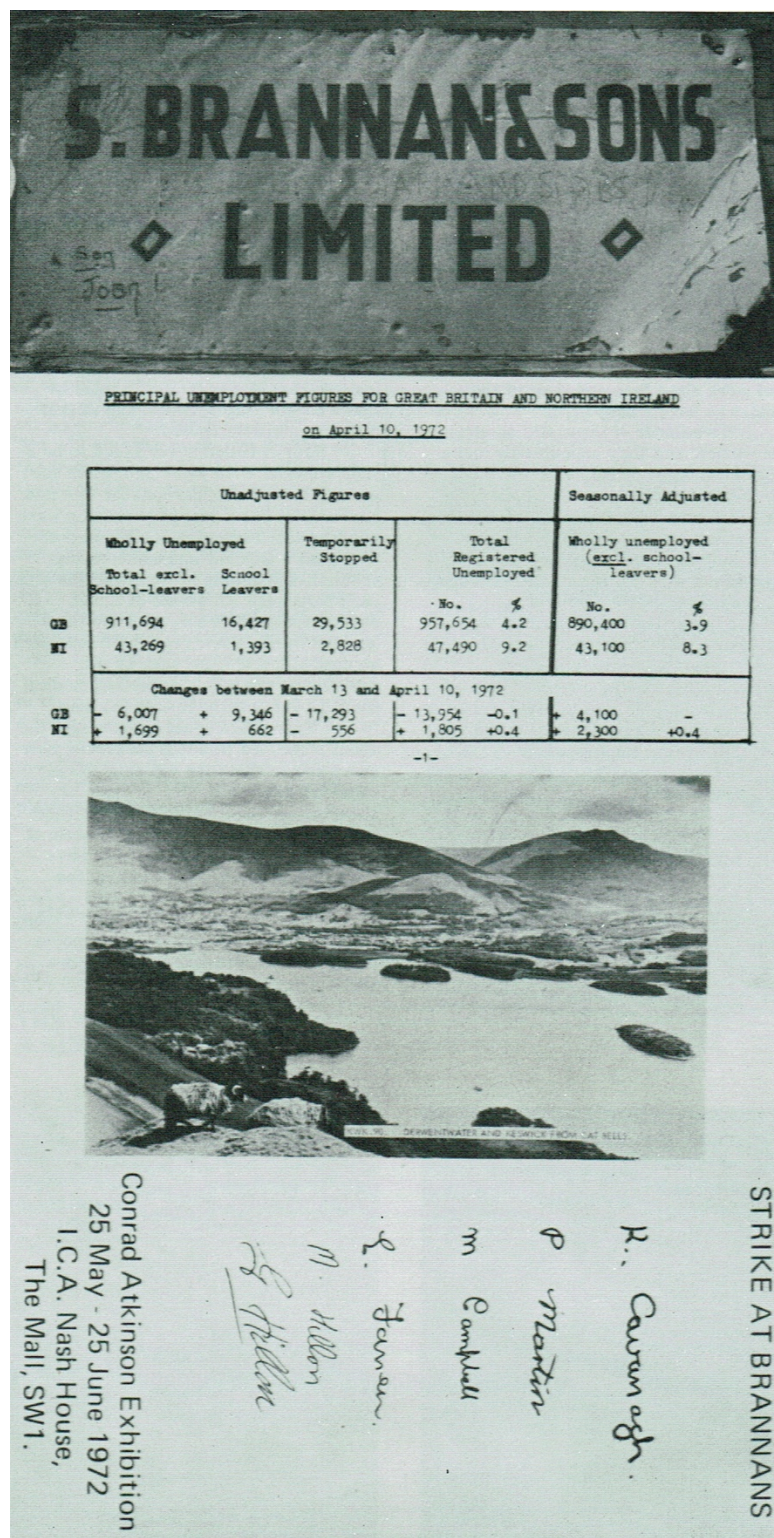


Fig. 25. Conrad Atkinson, invitation card to *Strike at Brannans*, ICA, London, 1972.





*Fig. 26. Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labor in Industry 1973-75, 1973-1975.*



*FROM THE PEOPLE WHO BROUGHT YOU  
THALIDOMIDE.*



April	1958	Thalidomide was introduced into Great Britain by Distillers (Biochemicals), a subsidiary of Distillers Co. It was sold over the counter for two years under the names of Distaval, Distaval Forte, Aemaval, Valgis, Valgraine, Tensival.	February	1973	A new offer of a charitable trust of £25,000 was made under the same conditions. This was dependent upon the creation of a new law releasing Distillers from some of their normal taxes. The parents were led to believe would be untaxed. The parents accepted this offer.
	1960	After two years it was sold on prescription.	July	1973	
November	1961	It was finally withdrawn five months after Distillers were warned.		1974	A Treasury ruling was issued that the Thalidomide children should be taxed at 48 pence in every £1. The Treasury argued that this was unavoidable without changing the law. The problem was resolved by the government paying the tax, which amounted to £1,154,000 out of public funds in the year.
	1962	Distillers Biochemical was sold to an American Company. Distillers Co subsequently claim they therefore have no records of Distillers (Biochemical) regarding sales, profits etc.	November	1975	After some disagreement with their insurers (Lloyds) Distillers received £1,000,000 in insurance for the cases.
	1963	First proceedings on a test case were started.		1976	Profits for Distillers - £127,000,000
	1965	Fifty nine parents met Distillers and lawyers advice, accepted as out of court offer averaging between £1,000 and £1,500 per child which was estimated as about one fifth of the child's probable needs, or forty per cent of a successful court case.	December	1977	Eighty four children still not in receipt of any compensation. These children were placed arbitrarily into a Y list as doubtful by Kimber Bull (solicitors) for administrative reasons, some having absolute proof of having had the drug. Distillers issued a statement to say that they would consider new information (which the Daily Mirror alleges they already had).
	1968	Distillers profits = £41,000,000			The diagnosis procedure for the Y list is questionable as the Medical panel initially set up was replaced by a specialist, Professor Richard Smithells. In one case a diagnosis made by Dr Michael Farmer in 1965 and subsequently confirmed by him in 1974 was contradicted by Professor Smithells without examining the child. A subsequent report to the Minister for the Disabled from Distillers said they had not received a copy of all the children's records.
November	1970	Three hundred and forty cases still outstanding.		1977	Profits for Distillers in the first six months = £74,000,000
	1971	The first offer to this group was made: this was that a charitable trust be set up which would receive £1,000,000 over eleven years. Half of this would be covered by tax relief to Distillers, thus the actual cost to Distillers would be £1,800,000 or equal to £1,500 per child. The terms of that agreement were that every family would be asked what they wanted, if anything. A type of means test would be used to ascertain what each family would get. This split the families in their action.			
	1972	A counter claim failed.	January	1978	We demanded that all assistance, grants and tax reliefs to Distillers should be cut.
Summer	1972	A new offer was made, in which families were given two options either a £3,500,000 trust over eleven years stripped of the collective unanimity clause or £1,800,000 cash sum to be divided up on average £1,500 per child. This also failed.	February	1978	Mr Morris, Minister for the Disabled announced an inquiry into the Y List. The parents of the Y list children had also signed the 1975 agreement therefore signing away all legal rights to take action against Distillers for negligence. Most Y list parents are now involved in litigation and the complexities of the legal procedures initiated and backed by the massive resources of a giant company.
		In December another charitable trust was proposed over ten years of £250,000 cash contribution from Distillers Co; secondly tax relief on that cash for Distillers Co; thirdly the interest gained on that part of the £250,000 retained by Distillers should be paid to Distillers. Thus the tax relief plus the interest gained equals £1,800,000 over ten years.	April	1978	Twenty years later eighty five children have still not had any money from Distillers. Please to Buckingham Palace to withdraw the Royal Warrant from Distillers products sold on deaf ears.
		The £3,500,000 equalled one months trading profit for Distillers Co.			Shareholders include: Eagle Star, Commercial Union, Legal and General, Phoenix Insurance, Pearl Insurance, Norwich Union, Prudential, Royal Bank of Scotland, Lloyds Bank, The Borthgoms of Llanthely, Harmeruth, Hillingdon and Lewisham.
	1972	Profits for Distillers = £18,000,000			
		A Royal Commission on Civil Liabilities was set up as a result of the Thalidomide			

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Fig. 28. Conrad Atkinson, *A Shade of Green, an Orange Edge*, 1975.

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